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· BAITING THE TRAP.

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BAITING THE TRAP

A Nobel


BY

JEAN MIDDLEMAS

AUTHOR OF "LIL" AND "WILD GEORGIE"

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I. GOSSIP	1
II. SHRINE DOORS	19
III. WILD TALK	41
IV. A KETTLEDRUM	60
V. SICK UNTO DEATH	78
VI. DESPAIR	97
VII. PARRIED THRUSTS	112
VIII. CHECKMATED	132
IX. STRAIGHT TO COVER	151
X. TRUTH WILL OUT	168
XI. A FRESH SCOURGE	186
XII. CONQUERED	202
XIII. "OLD DICK"	221
XIV. "GOOD-BYE, MARCIA"	236
XV. THE COMING HOME	248



BAITING THE TRAP.

CHAPTER I.

GOSSIP.

SOME weeks have passed and once again the sisters are alone together in their own home. No longer, however, in the pretty cottage, for according to Pettita's urgent wish a house has been taken in London, and there Margaret is striving determinedly to make herself a nest where she may feel contented and peaceful. Brought up from her earliest childhood in the country, it goes sorely against the grain, this striving to wrench herself from all her old pursuits, and to find out and begin new ones is no

easy matter ; for Pettita's sake, though, she is resolved to fight valiantly. And yet the child does not seem satisfied, she wanders listlessly about the house as though she had no occupation, no object in life, and the elder sister looks on patiently in mute sorrow. She too, like Richard Griesnach, has observed a striking alteration in the younger one,—all her merry spirits have departed, and have been succeeded by a querulousness and peevishness which render her anything but a pleasant and agreeable companion ; yet Margaret does not complain. On the one or two occasions when she ventured to ask a question as to the reason of the change, she met with so little encouragement that she had resolved to keep silent till Pettita herself should choose to speak. That Mrs. Leigh had something to do with the matter Margaret could not help suspecting, for whenever she and Pettita met there was a certain manner about the very gushing way in which they greeted each other, which, even to Margaret's unpractised

eye, looked very like acting. Still she could not make out any reason for the sort of mystery which seemed to pervade the air; she had not forgotten Mr. Griesnach's hints about Sir Edward, though she could not bring herself to believe in them, for whenever the young baronet was alluded to Pettita invariably scoffed at him, and called him "Sir Booby Lout," or some such disparaging appellation.

On the whole, poor Margaret's life was destined to be a thorny one; she had no sooner got over the difficulties of the unpaid bills than fresh ones arose in the shape of troubles about Pettita, for she could not look on at the present state of affairs without many secret misgivings. Somewhat petulant though Pettita had always been, yet she had ever been cheerful and joyous,—now she was either so cross and irritable as to be almost unmanageable, or she would sit in moody silence poring over a book; and had she not occasionally burst through the fences with which she had surrounded herself, and

told her elder sister how glad and thankful she was to have her with her once again, Margaret could not have failed to imagine that it was her presence in town which, by upsetting some of Pettita's plans, had occasioned all this change in her manner and disposition. Yet God only knew how Pettita clung to Margaret, how she would at times watch her while the other imagined she was reading steadily, and how she would long to throw herself on the elder sister's neck and weep out the history of her sorrows there. Perhaps Margaret was herself a little to blame for the barrier which had sprung up between them,—the disciplined severity of her own character rendered it no easy matter to make her a *confidante*.

Such was the state of affairs when, one morning before the usual visiting hours, Marcia Fenton was announced.

“Good gracious, what studious people!” she exclaimed, as she found both the sisters reading quietly. “I can't think how you

can do it, I never open a book unless I want to be sent speedily to sleep."

"And yet you joined a Ladies' Club composed of all sorts of strong-minded females," said Pettita, rousing herself and laughing as she held out her hand to Marcia.

"But I smashed it, so don't quote that as an instance in favour of my erudition. You can't think what a lot of would-be cleverness there is in London," she went on, turning to Margaret, "especially among the women; it must be stamped out occasionally, or we should not be able to bear ourselves. I hope you arn't strong-minded?"

"I object to women who seek to place themselves in prominent positions. I think the only arena in which a woman ought to shine is in the magic circle of home; the talents that were given her by her Creator were only intended to make her home happier," said Margaret in her matter-of-fact way.

Marcia winked at Pettita.

“Your sister will be horribly shocked at me, I am afraid, for though I am never likely to be celebrated, my friends tell me I shall end by being notorious; however, you will stand up for my having a few good qualities, eh, little one?”

“That I will, with all my heart,” cried Pettita warmly.

Marcia Fenton was her last *fureur* since her passion for Bertha Leigh had somewhat subsided, which it unquestionably had done ever since Bertha had taken to revealing truths in a bland way.

“Brava!” was the warm rejoinder. “I like to have you for a friend, for you are a staunch one. Our mutual acquaintance, Bertha, must have been doing some dirty tricks, or you would not have cooled on her as you have done.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Pettita, colouring up. “I have had no dispute with Mrs. Leigh, she was very kind to me during the time that I was her guest.”

“Oh! I dare say—when is Bertha not

kind? But she is very much like a wasp floating in honey for all that. Do you remember the party to the Abbey,—you did for yourself that day—I knew it at the time, though I kept my own counsel.”

Pettita's face was scarlet as she began stammering to excuse herself.

“Pshaw! don't be absurd,” cried the other in her off-hand way, “if you could succeed in fetching a lordship, why not? Everything is fair in love and war, as the saying goes, except, perhaps, occasionally some of Bertha Leigh's little machinations.”

“Lord Avebury is nothing to me—he is Mrs. Leigh's friend,” said Pettita stiffly, trying to draw herself up and look indifferent. Marcia, however, only laughed noisily, while Margaret looked curiously anxious, as though the new light which was breaking over her somewhat dazzled her.

“You are very unworldly, my dear Pettita, or you would not retire so easily from the scene and leave Lord Avebury to be hoodwinked by Bertha Leigh.”

“I don’t know what all this means,” put in Margaret softly, “but surely my sister is in the right. If the gentleman you speak of wanted to see her he would come here, he would scarcely expect her to run after him.”

“Oh! I have nothing to say about him, he is well enough in every way, though he hates me; but I should like our dear sweet Bertha to have a few stings, and if Pettita remains quietly in the back ground, Lord Avebury will end by being her devoted slave.”

“So be it,” said Pettita, as she turned away and began to tease the fire. “Lord Avebury, as I have told you before, has nothing whatever to do with me,—beyond the fact that I have occasionally talked to him when at Mrs. Leigh’s I know nothing of him.”

“And care less, I suppose,” continued Marcia, laughing. “Pettita, Pettita, I am terribly afraid you are a humbug.”

“I am sure I never wish to see him again, and I have told him so. He has given me

more trouble than any one I ever knew before, and it is very unkind of you, Miss Fenton, to talk about the subject at all," burst out Pettita in a voice that was almost choked by the tears she vainly sought to repress.

Marcia looked for a moment thoroughly astonished, she would not really have wounded any one for the world, though her unruly tongue frequently administered unintentional stabs. It had not entered into her head to imagine that there had been any serious annoyances on the subject of Lord Avebury's short-lived flirtation with Pettita, or she would not have referred to it on any account; now, however, that she had "floundered into a mire," as she would herself have said, she resolved to get out of it as neatly as she could. If she could succeed in dragging Pettita with her so much the better for them both.

"Good gracious!" she exclaimed after a moment's pause, "my rash tongue is always involving itself hopelessly; but never mind,

things generally find their own level sooner or later, and I dare say this will ; ” (here came a secret resolution to investigate matters on her own account, though unluckily she stood very low in the scale of his lordship’s favour)—“ we won’t say any more about the subject if you dislike it, only I really shall have to wear a gag, for there are so many things mayn’t be talked about—I wish people would not have secrets. You can’t think what a bother I have had lately with Sir Edward Bazalgette’s affairs. A young woman, of course supposed to be in love with him, has paid his debts to the tune of some thousands, and has bolted away into the realms of space—romantic, isn’t it ? ”

But neither Pettita nor Margaret were paying any great attention to her somewhat incoherent account ; so, finding she had all the talk to herself, she went on,

“ I wonder when Sir Edward will come back, and whether he cares for the girl or whether he don’t ;—report always gave him to you, Pettita.”

“Report seems to have been dealing pretty largely with my sister’s name ; I wish we had never left Woodlands,” said Margaret, to whom, unaccustomed as she was to hearing it, this sort of tittle-tattle was very offensive.

“Well, there is not much harm in suggesting that an alliance between a pretty girl and a dashing young baronet might be advantageous, particularly, too, when he has had his debts paid by a young woman who has had the good sense to skeddaddle.”

“How very indecorous,” ejaculated Margaret warmly. “I do not like what I hear of any of these people. In fact, I cannot understand how people can behave with such an utter disregard for the common decencies of life.”

“You are right,” answered Marcia in a more subdued tone ; “if one comes to look into the state of modern society, it is all made up of kickshaws and vanities, and it is rotten at core. People talk and talk and

talk, I do for one,—let us hope they do not mean the half they say.”

“It is a pity,” murmured Margaret half to herself, “for it is so difficult to unsay a rash word.”

Marcia, whose good-heartedness prevailed over all her other qualities whether of good or evil, looked at Margaret for a moment with welling eyes, then she said warmly, seizing her by both hands,

“If I might only have you for a friend and be as good as you are! There are not many such women in the world. Stick to your young sister there and guide her; there is a good deal of the stuff you are made of in her, though she is of a different type, and wants to be shown the road the knowledge of which comes to you intuitively. Good-bye, don’t think me mad. Ta-ta, Pettita, I will look in again soon, in the meantime you know where to find me if you want me.”

And she was gone like the rattle-pate she was, though with more of good in her little

finger than many primmer, more cultivated gentlewomen have in their whole machinery.

The sisters looked at each other for a second, then Pettita began to laugh hysterically; she knew an explanation must ensue with Margaret, and she scarcely felt equal to it.

“Pettita, my darling,” said the elder gently, “will you not make a *confidante* of me? What does all this mean?”

“It means that I must have excitement, whirl, glitter, to forget myself, and that were it not for you, Madge, I would go on the stage still, notwithstanding Mrs. Kelly’s predictions of no success.”

Margaret shivered.

“You have the money you once hoped to earn; thank God, there is no farther anxiety on that score. Be patient, dearest.”

“Patience, contentment! Margaret, you would not even preach them if you knew what I have to bear; even you would bid me commit any extravagance in order, if possible, to forget.”

Margaret could have lectured eloquently on the unwholesomeness of such a line of conduct, and on the future misery which it must inevitably produce, but she was wise enough to keep silence ; in Pettita's present excited state such a homily would but have served as an irritant. She rose quietly from her seat and putting her arm round her young sister, kissed her without speaking.

Pettita remained for a while motionless, her head on the kind true shoulder, then she raised it, and looking up asked suddenly,

“ Who was our mother, Madge ? ”

“ I do not know—but why do you ask ? ” and a shade came over the proud Margaret's brow, which showed that Richard Griesnach had not been wholly successful in concealing all the history of the past from the girls. Margaret had her suspicions, though, thanks to his care, they had never yet been verified.

“ *She* said I had reason to be ashamed of her, and I cannot forget it,” now broke out Pettita ; “ she told me to ask Mr. Griesnach for the truth, and I will.”

“Who told you this, my darling,—not Miss Fenton?”

No; Mrs. Leigh. Oh! Madge, she told me horrid things on that dreadful night, so kindly and so gently too; told them, as she said, for my good.”

“What were they, my pet? come and sit down and let me hear it all. When you were little, Pettita, I was always told your tiny woes.” And the stately somewhat cold-mannered woman changed into the loving listening elder sister, as she caressed the girl and sought to win her confidence.

It wanted but a few kind words,—the barrier which, during the last few weeks, had sprung up between them was cast down—and Pettita, in her rapid impetuous way, gushed out an account of her *tête-à-tête* with Bertha Leigh and her subsequent interview with Lord Avebury. But Margaret was too unsophisticated, too unversed in worldly intrigues to look below the surface; she was powerless to detect Bertha’s dark plots, and could only cry shame on Lord Avebury for

trifling with a heart which was learning fast to love him. What advice could she give, but that he should be forgotten, if possible, at all events treated with marked indifference if Pettita should meet him in society. What Miss Marcia Fenton had hinted about Pettita entering the lists to tilt for him with Mrs. Leigh was an unmaidenly course, which Margaret, under any circumstances, would have repudiated with scorn ; “ of course too,” she observed, “ Miss Fenton did not know what had been said, or she, also, must fully agree that such a man could only be treated with contempt.”

Who ever made a confession of this sort without a reservation ? Pettita was not the exception ; she kept back the episode of Mimi’s visit and the sending of the ring, which, in her heart, she firmly believed to have come from Lord Avebury. She had a misgiving, lest Margaret should oblige her to return it, and though her wrath raged high against the supposed donor, yet the inconsistency of her nature made her wish

to retain his gift for the present, till she should see what was the next turn affairs might take.

Long did she and Margaret sit and chat, till the oft-repeated discussion of past annoyances had to a great extent worn out their sting, and Pettita, for the time, at all events, was far more cheery. The shade, however, had passed from her to the elder sister, who seemed, as it were, born to bear other people's burdens, and who was more bowed down by the knowledge of this fresh trouble than she cared to express, for she saw clearly that to a young and trusting heart a stab like this must prove a lasting injury.

It was for this Margaret grieved, more than for the actual words that had been uttered, and it was this result that she resolved to set all her energies to forego if it were possible. Pettita's happiness was dearer to her than her own—to watch over it was her first aim in life. She was honourable, noble, and right-minded to a fault, the advice she gave would always be sterling

and honest ; but for all that, Marcia Fenton would have settled the present difficulties more easily than Margaret, for she would at once have heard Bertha Leigh's bland voice through all Lord Avebury's calumnies, while into Margaret's pure mind a suspicion that such duplicity could possibly exist would never enter.

“No, they must fight out the battle together bravely and in silence,—who knows, perhaps after all Pettita might eventually be very glad of Richard Griesnach's sheltering protection,” and with this thought she walked away to the window and sat down busily to her knitting.

*

CHAPTER II.

SHRINE DOORS.

THE denizens of "modern Judæa" have issued forth in very tolerable numbers from their usual haunts, and "the unmixed race," unique as it is in its own peculiar character, is strongly represented in old Jacobsen's art-den. But rarely during the old man's lifetime were his rooms so crowded, though it is as yet but early in the day. An unwonted bustle pervades the whole place, and the well-known bearded face with the hawk-like eyes is alone wanting to make you believe that business is going on as usual and that there has been no change. Cheapening and

bartering and pricing are proceeding as of yore, yet he who had once so vigorously directed it all has gone to his rest, and Miriam, the apostate daughter, has deserted her faith and her duty. At least so they all believed, those of her race who talked over Jacobsen's affairs in snatches as they discussed the prices his treasures would fetch on the morrow, when the sale was to take place. "She would never have left her home almost before her father's body was committed to the grave," they said, "if she had been true to her religion and its precepts."

Alas ! poor Mimi, she had talked with Christians, dwelt with Christians, till she scarcely knew which creed to believe in—the traditions of her youth could never die out of her remembrance, yet her trust in the bigoted opinions of her race had been shaken, and like many who had gone before her she had ended by vacillating hourly in her thoughts till she could scarcely answer herself the question as to which faith in her

opinion was the true one. She was to be pitied indeed, few more so, yet harsh were the judgments passed on her by those of her own people who were loitering in her old home; but in the all-engrossing fascination of exploring rooms filled with treasures, some of which Jacobsen had kept rigidly concealed even from his brethren, even Mimi and her sins were for a time forgotten, and about two o'clock the Babel of voices in which the peculiar Hebrew twang was so plainly perceptible had risen to its height—then outsiders began to straggle in, and in the course of the day *cognoscenti* and *virtuosi* of every grade and class had paid a visit to the well known art-den. It promised well for the morrow,—prices would unquestionably be run up, and he who meant to be the highest bidder for any specially favourite toy would have to dive deep into his pocket for an unlimited amount of coin. Later in the day when most of the throng of gazers had departed, Lord Avebury, impelled by curiosity, strolled in a careless *nonchalant*

way into the rooms. He had no intention of becoming a purchaser, but amusement was more or less of a necessity to him just then, so, hearing of the impending sale, he thought a view of Jacobsen's collection might serve to wile away a weary hour.

He looked on masterpieces of Cellini, on rare gems in Cinque-Cento art, on Venetian glass unparalleled in delicacy of design, on some old Moorish and Arabesque relics of priceless value, with the eye of a connoisseur ; then he passed on to the lace, which was a *spécialité* of old Jacobsen's, and examined critically the exquisite cobwebby textures which looked as though fairies' fingers only could have fabricated them. He looked on unmistakable sixteenth century Majolica, and wondered why the modern imitations fell so short of the original ; he examined carefully some priceless enamels ascribed to Luca della Robbia himself. For a long hour he gave himself up thoroughly to this feast of beauty, but there was no order to buy—though he was pretty narrowly watched by

numerous members of the broker brotherhood, to whom Lord Avebury's aristocratic appearance was by no means unknown.

At last he stood in front of the miniature cabinet which but a few days before the old Jew's death had called forth such universal admiration ; it was closed, and the exquisite mediæval workmanship of the exterior roused him from the almost dreamy sense of enjoyment with which he had been contemplating other wonders of art ; he threw open the doors, and as Mimi had done on a previous occasion he now stood entranced and gazed. There was something so surprising, so touching in the unexpected sight, —the seven dolors of Our Blessed Lady as they were represented by a master hand on those panels were so forcible and life-like,—that the eye rested there as though irresistibly detained. And Lord Avebury would probably have stood gazing for an indefinite time, had not voices of recognition recalled him to the world in which he was really dwelling, back from that world into which the

sight of those sorrows had caused his imagination to stray.

Replying to the salutation of his acquaintance in a hurried, almost uncourteous tone, he turned to the nearest broker and exclaimed,

“Buy it.”

“It will probably go dear, my lord,—what price?” asked the man of business at once.

Lord Avebury looked at him—it was Reuben.

Now, though a romantic sentimental feeling—call it what you will—had awakened in him a determination to possess himself of the cabinet, yet he was a practical man, and, moreover, had not been unused to trafficking in that very uncertain market where such gems as these are usually to be bought. The sight of Reuben recalled him to a sense of the necessity for “trading,” and he slipped a sovereign into the claw-like fingers.

“Don’t mention my name—buy it for

yourself as low as possible ; we will settle terms afterwards."

The Hebrew of few words chuckled and bowed his head—"This was the best stroke of business he had done to-day," he thought, as he resolved to fleece the Gentile noble.

Lord Avebury now turned away to talk over the contents of the rooms with the friends who had recognised him, but wherever he went he was followed doggedly by Reuben, who evidently had some ulterior purpose in view beyond the mere money-making which came into the every-day transactions of sale and barter. Reuben knew far more of the relations which existed between his young mistress and Sir Edward Bazalgette than did probably any one else, except themselves, and he was making up his mind how he could best use this knowledge to his own advantage, keeping Lord Avebury carefully in sight as he did so. At last, when his lordship was once more alone and was standing in contemplative study over a Titians of some worth, Reuben approached him again.

“My lord will forgive,” he said obsequiously; “the young swell is not in England?”

Lord Avebury looked somewhat astonished, but answered in his open unguarded manner.

“Do you mean my nephew Sir Edward? No, he is not in England. He is shooting somewhere abroad. Why do you ask?”

“Reuben knows,” was the only answer, however, which, accompanied by a leery wink, he received.

“Knows what, my good man, what is there to know?”

And the feeling of discomfiture about Ted Bazalgette’s affairs from which Lord Avebury could not wholly free himself came over him more strongly than ever as he heard these words.

Reuben shrugged his square shoulders, and clasped his hands as though begging to be asked no questions, but nevertheless he was fully prepared to answer them if liberally paid.

“Used Sir Edward to traffic in these toys, since you seem so well acquainted with him?” asked Lord Avebury, not quite knowing how to begin his quest for the information he would so gladly obtain.

“Coin too scarce,” was the curt answer.
“Gentiles borrow, Jews lend.”

“You don’t mean to insinuate that Sir Edward owed money to Jacobsen?” asked his lordship with some astonishment.

“Reuben says nothing, my lord.”

“Is he in difficulties—what is their amount?” went on the other somewhat horrified at finding that Mrs. Leigh’s hints had more than a foundation of truth.

“Difficulties,” repeated Reuben bowing, “in his class they have not an existence. The swell is my lord’s heir.”

“What has that to do with the matter? I am not going to die yet, my man.”

“Jews wait when money must come. Patience is Israel’s virtue.”

“Is the young beggar anticipating my death then?” exclaimed Lord Avebury with

a flashing eye. "Tell me, you dog of a Jew, has he been raising post-obits on what he expects to inherit from me?"

Reuben only simpered, he wanted his lordship to talk while he himself remained silent.

"It will be worse for him if he has done this," continued the angry nobleman; "why, I might marry to-morrow and have half-a-dozen children of my own. I did not think you money lenders were such asses as not to know this. So the young ape has been presuming to anticipate coming into my title and estates by the female line, has he? Well, all the ill-luck I wish him is that he may live to be disappointed."

"Christians proceed quickly—my lord has told me his own tale," said Reuben sententiously.

"How? Did not you hint to me that this was the case, you rascal?"

"Poor slaves cannot dispute with nobles. Reuben knows not if this be so."

"You are humbugging and deceiving

me," said Lord Avebury angrily, "but I will discover the truth notwithstanding. I know my nephew has been making a fool of himself with your master's daughter, but I have no doubt a little money will settle that."

Reuben looked up with a sinister lowering expression that was by no means an agreeable one.

"For Reuben gold is good," he said in a low voice, "but the Herr Patron's daughter wants it not."

"Doubtless she will get a good sum for these gewgaws, but I dare say she will not be above accepting something to have the nonsense bought out of her head."

"Beware, Gentile, noble though it is," hissed out the Jew between his half-closed teeth. "Fräulein Mimi is Reuben's God-given charge. As Reuben said the Kaddish for the Herr Patron, he swore to protect the female child."

Lord Avebury laughed scornfully; he was irritated by what he heard about his

nephew, and was consequently by no means so urbane as was his wont to those whom he considered his inferiors.

“To protect what?—her money or her honour?” he asked indifferently.

“Pure as the driven snow is Mimi, ‘daughter of Israel,’ was the answer; “only in loving a Gentile has it sinned.”

“Upon my word, I don’t understand your nice distinctions,” replied Lord Avebury testily, “and this is, moreover, scarcely the place for these discussions; come to my rooms to-morrow after the sale and let me hear the result of your negotiations about the cabinet.”

“Is it far, my lord? distance to the poor slave is money.”

Lord Avebury could not forego a smile as he gave him a card with his address and some silver coins to pay for his journey.

“Though why the deuce you call yourself a slave when you are as freeborn as any of us, I cannot imagine,” he said as he began to walk down the stairs which he had

mounted for the sole purpose of amusement, but at the top of which he had received some as annoying hints as ingenuity could possibly devise.

Reuben stood quietly there for some moments after he had disappeared, and there was a cunning expression on the displeasing face which showed plainly he had played the right card and won the odd trick during the short game of the last few minutes. Much as Mimi detested Reuben, he was nevertheless devoted to her, although she knew it not; in his hearing no word of calumny would dare be uttered against her without his resenting it fourfold. He knew of, or at all events suspected, the secret marriage, and though he had in consequence a bitter enmity against "the young swell," as he called Sir Edward, not only for winning one of Israel's daughters, but for meanly keeping out of the way, and thus tacitly denying the relations which existed between them, yet he determined to uphold Mimi to the utmost extent of his power. True, she had

always treated him with scorn, yet he cared more for her than anything on earth, save gold, and probably he also imagined that by serving her the last-named commodity would not be found wanting. He had learnt to-day what he had been seeking to find out for some time past, namely, that Sir Edward was, as matters stood at present, Lord Avebury's heir by the female line. Reuben knew exactly how far Ted Bazalgette was involved, and all his difficulties up to the time of old Jacobsen's death, but as no one since then had vouchsafed him any information on the subject, he was in entire ignorance of the fact of how Mimi herself had liquidated everything. She was gone abroad, he imagined to join Sir Edward, and although she had given express orders that her destination might be made known to no one, yet Naomi had promised to send a line to Reuben by some means, in order that he might have occasional news of the absentees. That line, with an address written almost illegibly, he took from his pocket now,

and as he perused it he determined to let the absent Miriam know that her recreant spouse might one day possess broad acres and be a "my lord" himself. The latter being a great thing in Reuben's eyes, who did not think much of a baronet, not quite understanding what sort of amphibious title that "Sare" was, that was neither Mister nor "my lord."

When Lord Avebury strode off, leaving Reuben chuckling in a state of self-satisfaction, he hailed the first hansom that passed and drove straight to Bertha Leigh's house. He had scarcely been there as much of late, the interview in her private den rankled in his mind, and he did not love Bertha any the better for the revelations she had then made. Now, however, he felt that there was no one to whom he could speak on the subject of his present annoyances but to Bertha Leigh.

The fascinating widow was alone, and he was received with an *empressement* and a geniality of manner which, to say the least,

was, all circumstances taken into consideration, very refreshing.

She smiled when he broke out in somewhat harsh invectives against Sir Edward. She knew quite enough of the younger man's affairs to be fully aware that this tale about post-obits, as far as his lordship was concerned, was totally without foundation, but it rather suited her purpose just then, so she resolved to use it.

"He is a naughty boy," she said in her insinuating way, "but I do not believe, dear Avebury, that he is so bad as that; besides, you are not going to die, you look younger and fresher than he does."

"I would have done anything for him," went on the irate uncle, "he was my favourite sister's son, but post-obits in anticipation of my demise—that cursed Jew!—pardon me, Mrs. Leigh, for this strong language, but I could have wrung his neck for the information."

Bertha set up one of her rippling laughs.

"Don't you know that when people are

wanted to die they invariably live the longer; it has added twenty years to your life, my friend."

"But shaken my faith considerably in the affection of my kind and the gratitude of humanity," he said soberly; "what have I not done for this boy?"

"Lambs will frisk," she answered gaily, "and I will not believe that my favourite *attaché* Ted is worse than the rest of his species."

"Oh! you are always an advocate for Christian charity and letting people off cheap for their misdemeanours, but I do not know how you can offer any extenuation for this one."

She kissed her hand to him in recognition of the implied compliment; she was particularly playful this afternoon, besides a word of praise was a rare thing of late from Lord Avebury's lips to Bertha.

"If the tale be true—and remember it has still to be verified—well, you have only yourself to blame that it could ever have

existed," she said; then she went on with some lace-work on which she had been engaged when he entered.

"I do not understand you—pray explain yourself."

She coloured slightly, and went on with her work without looking up.

"If you had married years ago instead of being such a perverse old bachelor, all this would probably have been averted."

"When I look round on the matrimonial ventures of my friends, I have not found them productive of great encouragement," he answered smiling.

"Indeed, then if that be your view of life why grumble at things as they are; you must accept the lesser evil, namely, that your nephew raises post-obits in anticipation of your demise, and every Jew in London looks you over to see when you are likely to die."

Lord Avebury winced. He was not without cause considerably galled by the discovery he thought he had made; however, he answered quietly,

“A son might more easily have placed me in the same position.”

Bertha got up and walked to the fireplace.

“You are too provoking ; if you are resolved in no way to recognise the ties of kindred and affection, it is useless to talk.”

“Well, I am getting too old now ; I don’t suppose any young charming woman would care to take a *blasé* old turnip like myself, and all my tastes would revolt against marrying a frump.”

Was this an indirect proposal, Bertha wondered ; she did not feel very sure, so she determined not to commit herself, but answered with a little modest timid air,

“There *are* women of taste who prefer men who have reached the meridian of life, seen something of its snares and difficulties, and who would consequently prove abler protectors than the young fledglings who, soaring up too soon, are obliged to raise post-obits to keep themselves still in full flight.

It was now Lord Avebury's turn to get up.

"If I thought I could avenge myself," he said as he walked to the window.

By marrying Bertha both his nephew and Pettita would be disappointed of his money, he thought, but he did not say so, though he suspected this was what Mrs. Leigh's last sentence implied.

She followed him.

"Avenge yourself," she repeated after him, "that is a very nasty word, you should learn to love and be happy, my dear Avebury, and leave revenge to disappointed, disagreeable people—at least that is my advice."

"Happiness is somewhat of a mythic word, do you think you can tell me where to ensure it, Bertha?"

It was the first time he had ever called her by her Christian name, the temperature was evidently increasing.

"It is not far off if you choose to look for it," she answered, still assuming a meek subdued air.

“He who would throw away happiness when it is placed within his reach were indeed a dolt and an idiot,” he said gallantly ; but this was not quite direct enough for Mrs. Leigh, and she resolved if possible to bring him a little nearer home.

“A chance of attaining it once abandoned is sometimes cast away for ever,” she said.

“True, and I sometimes think that such has been my fate.”

“My dear lord, you are indeed too bashful, too modest, on the subject of your own advantages,” and she put her soft white hand on his arm, and looked up into his face. It would be very delightful to be caressed by that soft touch, and to have all the rough places of life toned down by that gentle voice, and the words Bertha had pined for in solitude so long and almost risked her immortal soul to hear, Lord Avebury was just opening his mouth to speak—when one of the many chances with which life abounds stopped their utterance,

for the time at least,—and for him there was another respite.

Visitors, always visitors ! why does Bertha Leigh encourage such crowds of acquaintances about most of whom she does not care a brass button ?—because it is the fashion, forsooth !

At all events in her anger, her fury, her almost uncontrollable wrath, she determined that happen what might, she would cut these present intruders for ever from this day.

CHAPTER III.

WILD TALK.

RICHARD GRIESNACH had wandered back to town again after leaving Margaret at the station—and trying to follow her good counsel, he had devoted himself energetically to the ‘Argus,’ seeking, not vainly either, that self-forgetfulness which never fails to arise from honest labour. He was to a certain extent reaping his reward from the work which he had commenced solely on the behalf of the sisters; it was bringing grist to his mill in a pecuniary sense, and was unquestionably serving more or less as an antidote to the poison of mind which emanated from those dark hours in which, when

living in a state of comparative idleness, the little man had so frequently indulged. Jenkins' noisy bluster oppressed him still most painfully at times, but he was even getting more used to that than he ever expected he should; the man was so useful that he felt it would indeed be unwise to quarrel with him. He did all the hard work of running about, collecting information, looking after printers, bringing in the proof sheets, etc., and so left Mr. Griesnach in peaceful possession of his arm-chair and his pen. Thus day passed monotonously after day; he had seen the St. Ormes established in town, and felt that he was ever welcome in their house, however constant his visits might be, and so he must rest contented for awhile. He was too keen an observer of the feelings of others, too diffident about his own failings and infirmities, to seek in any way to plead his cause with Pettita. He saw plainly that all was not quite right with the child, and he loved her too well to add to her vexations by telling her of hopes and

fears in which he had an inward conviction that she would have no sympathy.

It was the day succeeding that on which Margaret had elicited the history of the real state of affairs from Pettita ; Mr. Griesnach went in as usual and was sitting in his customary arm-chair by the fire, drinking his cup of five o'clock tea. He had done a long spell of work that morning, and looked so weary that Margaret, as she sat back on the little sofa and watched him, could not help regretting for his sake that things could not be other than they were. Pettita had gone out with Miss Fenton, who was her tolerably constant companion now ; thus the two were left to chat as they frequently did in the familiar manner of old friends. There was never the same restraint over Richard Griesnach's words and actions when alone with Margaret, as there was when Pettita was present.

“The child is going to ask you a question, please do not answer it if the answer be, as I fear it is likely to be, a painful one,” said

Margaret after they had been talking in a desultory way on indifferent subjects for some time.

“How can you make such a request, Margaret?” he answered querulously; “should I be likely to say aught that would annoy Pettita? What is it that is troubling her mind, poor child?”

“She asked me yesterday who our mother was,” answered Margaret quietly.

He began to walk about the room in an excited way.

“Men should be tied up before they do such things,” he muttered to himself, “yet she was very beautiful and Pettita is like her.”

“Then my suspicions were not unfounded; tell me the truth, but spare it from my sister.”

He stopped in his walk and looked at her as though scrutinising her closely, in a way he had never done before.

“How comes it that you are so much stronger than she is? Why, after all,

should things be kept from her that may be told without reserve to you?"

"Because I have been tutored in the school of adversity."

"Margaret, do you know I am beginning to think you are a heroine?" and his penetrating glance seemed almost to enter into her soul. She quailed under it and her pale cheeks grew crimson. She retained her composure, however, and answered, trying to smile,

"This is begging the question, because I brought a difficult subject before your notice."

"No, indeed; I will tell you all I know if you wish it, but you must allow me to admire, as I do most heartily, the way in which you invariably face troubles and seek to overcome them. Would that I could do the same!"

"And why not? Faith and perseverance are all that is requisite,—but chiefly faith."

"Which in me is wanting. Would to

God I possessed it; but never mind my short-comings, they will last doubtless till annihilation arrives." And in a few terse excited sentences he gave the account of her father's marriage and the details of her mother's position in life; "though I should never have told this, Margaret, if you had not asked me; now you know whence comes Pettita's longing for the stage."

Margaret sat for some long time with clasped hands silently; she was reflecting over all that she had heard, and wondering how the knowledge of the past might affect Pettita's future life. She could not marry without telling it; that the proud Margaret would never brook, and might it not be the occasion of a blur cast on the young sister's name? She sat meditating so long that Mr. Griesnach grew almost alarmed at the effect his words had produced.

"My dearest child," he said, "you are not surely going to take the past so sorely to heart; I ought not to have told you, fool, dolt, that I am."

It was so long since Margaret had been thus endearingly addressed, that it was an entirely new sensation, one too which nearly overcame her, following as it did so suddenly on what she had just heard. She held out her hand to Richard Griesnach, the tears filling her eyes the while.

“You are in no way to blame, you have ever been my best and truest friend; you will help me, will you not, to face difficulties, and if God so wills it, to struggle through them?”

“I am a very bad person to assist you,—poor miserable cripple that I am,” he said despondingly. “I don’t know why I came into the world at all; it certainly was not for any good I do in it. Every one I care for seems to hate me,—everything I touch turns to misery.”

“Hush, oh! hush, Mr. Griesnach, for mercy’s sake don’t talk so wildly. You cannot think how wretched you make me when you give way thus, and I do not think you would willingly render me unhappy. There

are those, believe me, who revere, honour, even love you." And the colour mantled brightly on her cheek, but she went on almost jocosely, "The 'Argus' too, — I am sure under your magical care that worthy paper is surpassing even the bright expectations that were raised when it started. It was only yesterday I heard some people speaking of its management in most eulogistic terms."

"Every man has two lives, my dear Margaret, a public life and a private one; now of late I have but little to complain of in my public career, if my bodily infirmities would only permit me to work more I could hold my own as well as most men; but in private what have I to rejoice over? If I make money, as I am doing now, who have I to share it with me?"

Margaret shrugged her shoulders,—what answer could she give,—so the little man went on, "Even you do not, will not, recommend me to ask Pettita for that negative which we both feel sure would be

the inevitable answer to any appeal I might make."

"I must leave you to follow the unbiassed dictates of your feelings on that subject," said Margaret somewhat coldly.

"That is always the way; whenever I broach what is nearest my heart, you turn a deaf ear and grow cold and stern. Answer me, at once, honestly, as I did you a few minutes since. Do you know, positively, that Pettita would be inimical to my addresses?"

"I know nothing whatever of the matter," answered Margaret, still maintaining a frigid manner. "I have never discussed it with my sister."

"Then, will you do so for my sake? Surely, it is not so very great a request to ask you to find out what obstacles lie between me and happiness?"

There was a silence for a short space, then Margaret said in a strange hushed voice,

"I cannot; please, do not ask me to interfere."

“Why not?” he persisted. “Has any ill befallen the child? Has she entangled herself in some foolish engagement with that young ass, Bazalgette, who has twenty women after him without her? I cannot think why you are so mysterious, Margaret, and decline so positively to interest yourself in this business.”

“Pettita has, as far as I know, no thought of even flirting with Sir Edward Bazalgette; but, nevertheless, I would rather that you put whatever question you have to ask her yourself, and not through me. It is scarcely fitting that I should be used as an emissary. I do not wish it to be said that I have biassed her feelings either way.”

Griesnach was utterly astonished; that Margaret, who was invariably so good-natured and careless about the trouble she took as long as she could conduce to the welfare of others, should be so perversely determined that she would say nothing to Pettita, perplexed him much. It was a problem which, clear-headed though he was,

he failed to solve; in fact, the more he thought of it, the more puzzled he grew.

“There is something,” he said, “something which I am evidently not intended to understand; it is very hard that I should be victimised, my feelings set at naught, especially, too, by those for whom I would sacrifice so much,” and he grew very excited as he wandered up and down the room.

But Margaret still sat passively on, she did not attempt either to contradict or to soothe him, but watched him with a hardness and inflexibility which were very unlike her usual tender-heartedness.

Presently, with a sudden dash, the door opened, and Pettita like a sunbeam burst in; she had been driving with Marcia, and her pretty face looked rosy and fresh, her eyes sparkled, too, more brightly than they had done of late,—there was something about Marcia Fenton’s racy sallies which never failed to raise even the most drooping spirits.

“Dear old Dick, I am glad to see you,”

she said in her saucy way, totally unheeding a reproving look from Margaret, who always dreaded what might happen when Pettita was so familiarly indifferent to the little man's secret feelings. At which, however, in justice to her it ought to be observed, she did not even guess.

He winced, as he invariably did, at the off-hand greeting; in fact, he had not intended to linger till she arrived, for remembering the query which she might put to him at any moment, he had no desire to meet her just then, so he stammered out an answer about his regret that he must be off now at once, as business of importance required his attention, and so he shambled somewhat awkwardly out of the room. Pettita was amazed, and as Margaret still did not offer to move, she poured herself out some tea and sat down on the hearth-rug to drink it.

"I do not wish to be inquisitive, Madge," she said after she had sat there a few seconds and no word had been spoken by either of

them, "but has he been proposing to you? You both looked very queer when I came in."

Margaret was scarlet in a moment.

"Foolish child, what will you suggest next? You always seem to seek the highly improbable."

"Nothing could be more likely, I should think, than that old Dick should be in love with my sweet Madge—only, darling, I think you are a great deal too good for him."

"For mercy's sake, Pettita, do be quiet, this rash talk is very unfitting; if Mr. Griesnach heard you, he would be seriously annoyed."

"Well, he is a good little man and very kind to us—there is no gainsaying that point; but still, Madge dear, he is not very attractive looking, is he? and even you, with your Quakeress ways and staid demeanour, might command a more elegant-looking adorer."

"Mr. Griesnach's intellectual powers far

surpass the average amount given to men," answered the elder sister gravely.

Pettita smiled with a knowing twinkle.

"Oh! of that I have no doubt, but as I am not clever myself you see I cannot fathom them. I am glad, however, to find that you have discovered and appreciated them. By the by, Madge, what fun it would be to see you working away at the 'Argus'; do you know, when I came up to town old Dick actually asked me to help him with it—suggested that it would suit me better than the stage! Now, I do think *you* might do something.

"Women's work, according to my theory of life, does not lie in any public career," was the sober reply.

"Now, Madge dear, please don't talk nonsense, some women *must* go into public careers or how would the world go on at all; fancy a play acted by men only—what a lively performance it would be!"

"But such women as you and I are, Pettita, have nothing to do in these matters."

“That remains to be proved, my Madge ; there is that within me which tells me if I do not have a safety valve soon, some horrible thing will happen to me. I shall not be able to bear myself much longer. Oh ! you need not look so shocked, I am only tainted with the spirit of the age. You should have heard Marcia Fenton talking this afternoon ; you see there are more women than men in the country, dear, and the poor creatures must do something to gain an honest living.”

“I am afraid Miss Fenton is scarcely a good companion for you if she puts this nonsense in your head ; besides, as I have told you before, you do not want money now. We have enough thank God for all moderate requirements.”

“Money, yes, it brings a great many nice things and helps to discover modes of killing time, but still it does not altogether fill up the void—eh, Madge—have you found it so ? ”

The elder sister did not answer, so Pettita went on,

“I don’t suppose you ever had a void; matter-of-fact natures like yours don’t understand what that craving longing sort of hungry-soul feeling means, but I do, Heaven only knows how well;” and she sprang to her feet and began to ramp about the room scarcely less excitedly than Richard Griesnach had done only some half an hour before.

Poor Margaret, she was destined to hear a good deal of wild talk that afternoon, and to force herself to listen to it calmly.

“No, there is nothing but the stage,” continued Pettita; “I must have excitement and glitter to make me forget myself.”

Margaret did not contradict her, so after she had marched about the room for some little time, giving vent to her emotions in no very measured terms, she dropped down at last once more in her old place in front of the fire and looked up at her sister. The silent tears were coursing each other down Margaret’s face. They were the only outward sign of her inward feelings.

Pettita threw her arms round her neck.

“Madge dearest, I cannot bear this; it is bad enough to have to put up with what cannot be helped, but to see you cry,—you who are always so placid and immovable,—is more than I can stand. What *is* the matter?”

“Nothing, Pettita child,” she answered, gently disentangling herself from her embrace, “only I think if you, my young sister, were to go on the stage it would break my heart.”

“Poor Madge, poor Madge,” and Pettita sat quietly down and leant her head against the other’s knee; then she paused for a few seconds and said in a low tone half to herself. “A broken heart—what a queer weird sound it has—and the wrench,—oh, my God! pray, Madge, that I may never die of a broken heart.”

Margaret leant over her and kissed her.

“Rouse up, my pet, my joy—there are bright days in store for you yet, if you will only have faith; only promise that come

what will you will never seek the vain pleasures of the stage as an antidote."

"I cannot promise, because if evil comes I will not answer for myself," she replied. "I am not true and staunch and brave as you are, Madge. Some of my mother's blood must tingle in my veins, if she was what Mrs. Leigh hinted on that never-to-be-forgotten night."

Again the colour came and went on Margaret's pallid cheek—what emotions had she not been made to suffer that day!

"Hush, hush! my darling, let the past, whatever it has been, be buried in oblivion; and for the future, pet, look forward to do your best strengthfully—to the utmost will I help you."

Thus she, as ever, sought to forget herself, and with the heroism which Richard Griesnach was at last beginning to discover, she devoted herself to smooth the rough place in that less patient, more fragile life, thus trusting too that in a great measure she might lighten her own burden and make her cup

of sorrows less difficult to quaff. Storms, however, were rising on the horizon, though Margaret as yet did not see them; and it would require the greatest tact, the most delicate touch, to guide the tiny bark she had mentally undertaken to steer, safely through the troubled waters into which it had plunged.

Whether it shall be wrecked or saved who knows, or how many warm hearts and honest feelings shall be crushed before the port is gained ?

CHAPTER IV.

A KETTLEDRUM.

A KETTLEDRUM at Lady Bluntisfield's! There is something very sombre and uncomfortable in the bare idea. How unlike must those aristocratic *réunions* be to the cosy half Bohemian meetings in Belgrave Street, where Bertha dispenses her hospitalities with so much grace. Yet there is a very fair response in way of numbers when her ladyship announces her intention of being 'At Home'; and in the assemblage of people to be found at her house, there is a strong admixture not only of the upper ten, but of that still more select body, the five hundred *par excellence*.

How Lady Bluntisfield ever arrived at being on terms of intimacy with Mrs. Leigh was the wonder, though Bertha's little attractive ways and fascinations could generally gain for her an *entrée* wherever she thought it worth while to effect one. Lady Bluntisfield had not forgotten her intention of extending a hand to Pettita, and had made the acquaintance of Margaret with much pleasure ; there was just the sort of old-fashioned prim manner about the elder Miss St. Orme, which was sure to afford satisfaction to this somewhat rigid stickler for well-nigh extinct proprieties. On this particular afternoon then the two sisters made their *début* at Lady Bluntisfield's *matinée* ; it was, in fact, the first time that they had appeared together in fashionable circles. Mrs. Leigh was there, exquisitely dressed, the perfect model of the highly finished woman of society ; bland, courteous, chatty, and above all, so interested in hearing the details of everybody's little private affairs—in a word she was charming. In

reality she had scarcely recovered from 'that odious interruption,' which had only taken place two days previously, but she had hopes that the occasion might speedily return, and in the meantime, like the wise tactician that she thought she was, she resolved to imitate the *ingénue* as closely as her somewhat stormy past would allow. To Pettita she was urbanity itself, "so pleased to see her there, she was looking so pretty too, it was quite refreshing, where did she get that charming little 'capote'? the milliner must be found out and adopted forthwith; and Margaret, she had really never known before that she was half as handsome, but then London clothes do make such a difference. Were they not both glad that they had been induced to come to London?"

Thus did Bertha prattle on, playing the amiable till she almost overshot the mark, for neither of the sisters responded very warmly to her pretty platitudes. With Margaret she had never been an especial

favourite, and Pettita was beginning to distrust her.

She was still uttering her little honied nothings when Lord Avebury arrived, and it was scarcely with a feeling of pleasure that she watched the colour come and go on Pettita's bright face.

"Don't be afraid, dear child," she whispered softly, pressing the girl's hand the while "I will undertake his lordship. He shall not torment you with any of his naughty little speeches."

He came up to them presently, shook hands with Mrs. Leigh, but only bowed to Pettita, looking at her the while with such a queer expression on his honest open brow, that it required the greatest amount of self-control on her part to repress the rising tears.

Mrs. Leigh was as good as her word, she engaged him in such lively conversation that he had no opportunity of addressing Pettita, even if he had desired it. How long this might have gone on one hardly knows,

though Pettita was in purgatory the while, but Lady Bluntisfield, who hated amalgamations as much as Bertha loved them, came forward to put a stop to this one, and by one of those whimsical freaks with which society is ever rife, Lord Avebury found himself with Margaret St. Orme on his arm going in quest of a cup of tea ! Each knew too much about the other to feel particularly happy in the introduction, and for a few minutes conversation flagged accordingly ; but an intelligent woman and a man used to the ups and downs of captious Fortune, as Lord Avebury was, were not likely long to look shyly on each other like two bashful children. He, being the older and more *au fait* of the two, led the van ; and soon they drifted into a pleasant easy chat, each growing as it proceeded more and more prepossessed with the other. To Lord Avebury this cultivated young gentlewoman, with her somewhat old-fashioned views of life, was just the sort of person he had hoped for, and was prepared to be delighted in—in the Madge of

whom he had heard so much. And with Margaret herself, her prejudices against her sister's admirer were fast passing away, and she could not bring her mind to imagine that the noble-looking pleasant-mannered man with whom she was conversing could ever have been guilty of the false, underhand conduct which had been ascribed to Lord Avebury.

"It is a pity, for she would have suited me for a sister-in-law. She ought to have been able to teach the little one modesty and prudence ; I wonder if she is really as bad as Bertha Leigh makes out,—but in these days of easy divorce a man cannot be too careful. I would not figure in that court for the world."

Such were some of the thoughts which flashed through Lord Avebury's brain as he conducted Margaret to a seat and edged his way across the tolerably crowded room. Another fortuitous chance, and he found himself standing next Pettita in one of those tiny corners formed by the mass of people

who will always congregate in the middle of a room, and from whom he could not extricate himself without being markedly rude.

They looked at each other, but did not speak; platitudes are seldom ready when the feelings are deeply interested.

At last Pettita drew something from her pocket and gave it to him.

“Will you take it back, please, I would rather not keep it?”

It was the ring Mimi had brought her on that last evening at Mrs. Leigh’s.

He looked at it and started visibly, for he recognised it instantly. It was a ring of some value, which had belonged to his dead sister, and had consequently come into his nephew’s possession.”

“You wish me to give it to Sir Edward; would it not be better for you to fulfil the mission for yourself, Miss St. Orme?” he said with a haughty manner.

“Sir Edward! what do you mean?” asked Pettita bewildered, “what has he to do with that ring?”

“That must be best known to yourself, my dear young lady, but at the same time, although, of course, I feel flattered by the selection, I scarcely care to be the emissary.”

“But Sir Edward has nothing whatever to do with the matter; I want *you* to take the ring.”

“His ring to me! that is impossible, Miss St. Orme.”

“How can it be his ring, why should he send me a ring, and by a woman too?” asked Pettita, half talking to herself in a state of the most intense mystification.

Lord Avebury bowed and raised his shoulders as though he would fain echo the query.

“Oh! but I don’t understand it at all; there is some terrible mystery of which I am being made the victim.”

“Nothing more comprehensible, I should imagine,” said his lordship with a sneer, “than that a young attractive lady like

yourself should have aroused my nephew's attention and made him hope to obtain favour in your eyes."

"You are quite wrong, I am sure you are; and oh! this ring, do please take it! Margaret would be so angry if she knew it was in my possession, and how could I help a strange woman walking into my room under pretence that she was the dressmaker and putting it down on the table?"

Lord Avebury looked very sceptical, though what reason Pettita could have in fabricating this tale for his amusement he was at a loss to conceive. He answered stiffly,

"Your sister would have every reason to be displeased, but at the same time I should recommend you to give the ring over to her. Under any circumstances I must decline to take it."

Pettita was angry. She felt herself to be thoroughly aggrieved with Lord Avebury, and consequently entitled to snub him as much as she pleased, but that he should

presume to treat her in an indifferent, haughty manner she felt by no means inclined to brook.

“Mrs. Leigh is right,” she said petulantly, “you *are* capable of placing a woman in a false position and then glorying over her discomfiture,” and she pushed her way resolutely through the little crowd in front of them and left him alone to dwell in astonishment on her words.

“Bertha Leigh ! What had she been saying about him ? Was the whole misunderstanding owing to her cursed interference, and was the girl as pure and gentle and modest as he had at first believed and hoped,—but yet that ring, there was a tangible proof that something was going on. She could scarcely have possessed it if she had not been giving encouragement to some one. In fact, she seemed to have so many lovers that she could not herself decide from whom the bauble had come. No, he had best have nothing to do with the business ; he should only get himself into an inextric-

able mess if he were fool enough to marry a young giddy flighty thing like that."

And by no means in a good humour or inclined to bandy courteous nothings with the numerous acquaintances by whom he was surrounded, he was preparing to effect if possible an unperceived retreat, when he was stopped on the top of the stairs by Bertha Leigh, who had planted herself in order to command the exit.

"Not going, Lord Avebury? I had reckoned on you to escort me home; it is so near that I have sent the brougham away."

"I shall be delighted—are you ready now?"

"Well yes—in a few minutes, but why such hurry? If you are overwhelmed as usual with engagements, pray don't let *me* detain you," and there was just the least elevation of the arched eyebrows.

"Engagements must give place when a lady wills," he answered with a certain amount of stiff gallantry.

Now there is nothing a woman hates so much as excessive politeness from a man she thinks she has won, and Bertha at once felt that ground had been lost since their last meeting.

“How odious you are to-day,” she said pettishly; “if you are only coming with me because you think it necessary to be civil, pray do not trouble yourself, only I had something rather important to tell you about Ted.”

“Has he returned to town?”

“No, but his debts are all paid.”

“*Carramba!*” and Lord Avebury, his attention now fully awakened, wedged himself into the corner by the door close to which Mrs. Leigh was standing.

“No, no, indeed I am not going to discuss the matter here—walls have ears, my dear lord,—you must come into my house if you want to hear more.”

The bait was caught and they went down the stairs together—of course they met Pettita — Mrs. Leigh would not have

moved forward without making sure of a *rencontre*.

“Ta-ta, little one, I am going off early because Lord Avebury has an engagement and cannot see me home later. Come and look me up soon.”

Having lured him out with her for the purpose, of course Bertha was compelled to give him all the information she had obtained from Marcia Fenton anent Sir Edward Bazalgette’s affairs. She had known it for some days, but she always liked to keep something in reserve for emergencies, added to which she felt sure it must shortly become so publicly known as to reach his lordship’s ears in some roundabout way.

“How you succeed in obtaining all this information I cannot possibly imagine,” was his exclamation when she had said her say.

“If I did not know that it interested you, do you think I should take the trouble?” she answered with one of her little meaning side-looks.

“Upon my word I do not think I am any

the better for having a knowledge of the matter ; I shall wash my hands of the young scapegrace altogether. He has never chosen to consult me, and if he has the rare faculty of getting into endless trouble and then finding some woman silly enough to help him out of it, well, I don't see why I should interfere, though to tell you the truth I have my doubts about the authenticity of this somewhat marvellous tale."

"You don't imagine *I* would tell you fibs."

"Not for a moment ; pray don't misunderstand me, but your informant may not altogether have been quite correct as to details. Anyhow, I do not think I shall allow the story to disturb me."

"Nonsense, Lord Avebury, I had it from Marcia Fenton, and she has been arranging the whole thing ; £5000 with 10 per cent. interest is to be paid over to her father in full !"

"On the strength of which farther post-obits can be raised as occasion may require ;

thank you, Mrs. Leigh, for this information, I think I have heard altogether about as much as I care for this afternoon."

"I told you at Lady Bluntisfield's that you were odious, now I proclaim you bearish," and Bertha turned away pouting.

"Forgive me," he said holding out his hand to her, "I am not well to-day; as one gets on in life disagreeable intelligence always has a dyspeptic tendency."

"Matter of fact, *jusqu'au bout des ongles!*" she cried half angry, half laughing; "I quite despair of ever bringing you to a sense of your own perfections."

"Humility is worth more than a kingly crown," he said smiling; "but I really must be off, you have provided me with food for some hours' thought, and it is hardly fair to torment you with my private worries; when I have settled them satisfactorily to myself I will come and pay you another visit, and we will talk I hope on a pleasanter topic."

She was perforce compelled to let him go,

but that she was not well-pleased was plainly visible on the puckered brow and the evil countenance, on which she no longer made any effort to control the outward appearance of the strong passions which were surging within.

“That little beast of a girl,” she muttered at last after she had sat quietly for some minutes; “I saw her talking to him in a corner; I would strangle her with pleasure if I dared, but since her body cannot be touched her reputation must be made to suffer. There is no sin a woman can commit so infamous as that of being found out, and she shall be found out without having committed the sin, that is all. I think I have started a few hints already; I wish Ted would come back, he is rather an important tool missing.”

And the amiable widow was very catlike and quiet in her movements all that long evening that she was destined to pass by herself; it was not often that she indulged herself with a little solitude, and it was as

well perhaps, or more dark plots would have been concocted, for Bertha Leigh's lonely hours were always used for the purpose of fertilising future plans ; she never dedicated them to the retrospect of her past failures and misdeeds. She did her little bit of pretty needlework, she skimmed in a desultory way the last new magazine, she sang her little song to herself in her soft low voice as though she were composing an anodyne. Bertha never condescended to bestow her musical powers on her friends, and very seldom indulged in them herself unless some unusual annoyance required a more than ordinary amount of soothing and pacifying. All the while that this calming process was proceeding and she was returning slowly to her chronic state of placidity and self-control, Pettita was nevertheless not forgotten. A regular plan of action Mrs. Leigh could scarcely map out, so much must depend on the crooked ways of circumstances, but that she would quietly put in the little half words which would make people prick up their

ears and ask each other "What there was against the younger Miss St. Orme?" was her indubitable determination. Poor Pettita! it was a fierce warfare in which she had entangled herself, and, unsophisticated as she was, she had taken her stand on very unknown ground when she had started off to London to fight out the great battle with no less an opponent than Bertha Leigh. How it was all to end must soon be decided now, feelings were running too high for the crisis to be long averted. And the course of events was looking rather black for Pettita, who, unless some unexpected help arose, was almost impotent in the hands of her wilier and more powerful rival.

CHAPTER V

SICK UNTO DEATH.

A SMALL *apartement* in an out-of-the-way quarter of Paris. It is showily, even prettily furnished, in accordance with French taste, although it is situated in anything but a fashionable locality. Opening out of the *salon* or principal room, is a sleeping apartment, in which, crouching over a wood fire, are seated Mimi and old Naomi. There is no lamp or candle alight, though it is evening, but the occasional flicker from the fitfully burning wood shows an expression of misery, almost of despair, plainly pictured on both their faces.

Every now and then they muttered to

each other, but in low tones as though they were afraid of being heard, and so indeed they were, for in the bed which stood back in an alcove at the farther end of the room lay Mrs. Kelly, sick even unto death, as they both feared. As Mimi sat and listened to her good old friend's moanings, she upbraided herself for having been instrumental in bringing her abroad. She would not listen to Naomi's assurances that she might have been quite as ill in England. "It was all her fault, she reiterated, another punishment sent her for having been disobedient to her father's wishes and her father's God." And Mimi cowered in mental agony before what she would only recognise as the dread vengeance of an insulted Deity, till her sufferings of mind were almost as fearful to behold as were those bodily ones from which it was probable that Death alone would release poor Mrs. Kelly.

They had had doctors—the best that could be procured—for Mimi had spared no expense ; but they had given but little hope,

and now they had telegraphed to England for the only brother of the sufferer, the sole relation she seemed to have belonging to her, and they were hourly expecting his arrival. It was the Christian Saturday evening, consequently the Jewish Sabbath, ending as it does at sunset, was already spent. Naomi, more strict in her religious observances than was her young mistress, had during the course of the day absented herself for a short space in order to attend the service in the synagogue in the Rue Notre Dame de Nazareth, which was not very far from the house in which they were dwelling. Something had evidently occurred there which she was very desirous of communicating to Mimi, only she could not succeed in arresting her attention, or in fact in any way interesting her in aught but what directly concerned this new and fearful trouble which had come upon her.

“O Lord rebuke me not in Thy wrath; neither chasten me in Thy heavy displeasure. For thine arrows stick fast in

me, and Thy hand presseth me sore,— was the only answer she received as Mimi, in a sort of low dirge-like chant, bewailed her sins and shortcomings, and pleaded mercy for them in the words of the thirty-eighth Psalm. Now even to Naomi, scrupulous about her religious faith, almost bigoted as she was, this was scarcely lively, especially as the old woman was afflicted with an immense amount of garrulity and would fain have chatted away the weary time during which “the post of observation grew darker every hour.” At last, when a little lull fell over Mimi’s dreary bewailings, Naomi seized the opportunity, and broke in in her quaint odd German, which must fain be translated here:

“I saw a friendly face to-day when I was returning home.”

“Whose?” asked Mimi, compelled at length to answer this direct appeal.

“Even Reuben, the son of Elimelech,” was the answer.

“Reuben in Paris! What is he doing

here? Wherefore has he come?" asked Mimi, anything but pleased by the intelligence. Had she not hoped to escape from the pursuit of her own people, and did she not dislike Reuben above all the rest of her father's dependants?

Now Reuben had charged old Naomi especially to avoid mentioning that she had seen him; having assured himself that all was well with his young mistress, he simply wished to give the old nurse one or two hints to be conveyed as occasion might offer, and then he meant noiselessly to return to his avocations in England; but, as he had almost feared, Naomi's unruly member was not to be trusted, and she could not resist telling Mimi all that she had seen and heard.

"The good Reuben has already returned to the great English capital," she answered; "he had business here I suspect. I met him almost by chance."

"And it was evil chance, Naomi; were it not for dear Mrs. Kelly's illness we would

leave Paris to-morrow in consequence; I care not to be followed thus."

"It is very hard to be cut off from communication with all one's old associates," Naomi crooned out.

"Return to them then forthwith. You came with me of your own choice; you can leave me when you will, but must obey me while we are together."

"Leave the blessed child, the holy Archangels forefend!" exclaimed the old Jewess in so loud a tone that Mimi seized her by the wrist and pointed to the bed.

"Reuben brought news," she went on in a lower voice, after there had been a short pause.

Mimi shivered almost imperceptibly, she always dreaded to receive news from England, yet she was totally unaware how much Reuben knew of her affairs, and so scarcely imagined he could have brought any communication which would affect her much.

“Go on,” she said, “what was it?”

Once given permission to speak, Naomi began a long rambling account of the sale and the enormous prices at which the various treasures they both knew so well had been bought.

“One thing I meant to have retained, but my poor brain was too confused, the mediæval cabinet,” said Mimi half speaking to herself as she listened somewhat dreamily to Naomi’s whispered account.

“Reuben bought that himself for a ‘m-lord,’ who said he would give any price for it, Lord —— oh ! I have the name written down somewhere ;” and the old woman fumbled in her pocket and produced a piece of dirty paper on which was scribbled the one sentence.

‘Sir Edward Bazalgette is heir to his uncle Lord Avebury’s title and estates.’

Mimi held it to the fire, and by dint of poking at the logs of wood succeeded in making out what was written.

Then she grew deadly pale and lay back

in her chair for some moments without speaking.

“Did Reuben give you this?” at last she asked; “and if so, what does it mean? Is Lord Avebury dead? Holy Abraham! how ruthless is the avenging angel!”

But Naomi did not know—Reuben had not made a *confidante* of her.

“If it were not so,” thought Mimi, “what object could there be in communicating the fact?” She had not the far-sightedness of her humble and more cunning follower; it never occurred to her, as it had done to him, what could be made in an *£. s. d.* point of view out of this piece of intelligence. As it was, the news gave her excessive pain, and in awakening old memories made her resolve more than ever that unless stern Fate resolutely decreed otherwise, never would she and Edward Bazalgette meet again on earth. She would go with Naomi and wander about the Black Forest; there were numbers of her own race there, and though personally unknown to them she felt sure they

would scarcely treat her as a Pariah or an alien.

She thrust the crumpled paper into her pocket, and hearing the poor sufferer moving restlessly in her bed, she rose and went to her. Her private griefs and anxieties must all for the time sink into insignificance before that relentless foe who was overshadowing their little circle, and threatening almost the only real friend Mimi believed herself to have in the world.

“Raise me up,” she asked in a feeble voice; “the hour is not far distant, my child—a day, perhaps two at the most, and we must part; but fear not, I have no regrets save that of leaving you alone in a strange land.”

“Oh! Mrs. Kelly, do not talk thus; I cannot part with you. God’s impending judgments are too fearful for me to bear.”

“Your loss will be my gain, let that be your consolation when you think of me,” was the answer cheerily given; even as she lay there facing death Mrs. Kelly did not

lose her composure or her kind thought for others.

“But what shall I do, what shall I do?” sobbed Mimi; “my cup of bitterness is full even to overflowing.”

“Yet you must drink it to the last dregs if the Lord wills, and he loves not that his daughters should murmur,” said the sick woman.

“Have I not drunk of it? Oh! my God, when shall this earthly veil be rent and Zion be entered by thy weary child?”

“When the probation is over, dear love, and the hour He has preordained shall have arrived, then, even as he seeks me now, the Angel of Death will come for you, and Mimi—though I have not known you long, I have loved you much—take a dying woman’s words to heart, my daughter. Be strong in faith and never flinch from duty, if you have done a wrong, make reparation quickly, lest it be too late.”

There was an energy, a force about these words which made Mimi start as she heard

them. What wrong had Mrs. Kelly done to any human being, she who was ever so thoughtful about others ?

“ If I could only follow in your footsteps,” she murmured, “ I should be a happier and a better woman.”

“ Yet there was a blot which for years blurred the surface of my life, and before death comes I should like to speak of it to you. My late husband, as you may perhaps have heard, was scarcely as honest, upright, and kind as he might have been, though, God knows, I have no wish to upbraid him now. Who am I that I should judge another ?—especially as I look on what I had to bear at his hands as part of my just punishment.”

“ Your punishment, for what ? ”

“ You shall hear, my child, and may the lesson bear profitable fruit. He was the betrothed of another, a bright-faced merry girl whom I met occasionally during my professional career. At last a lover’s quarrel arose between them, on what subject I knew not then ; their engagement was broken off,

and Henry Kelly declared his affection for me, which he said had sprung up the first moment he saw me, and had at once changed his sentiments towards his first love. I was weak enough to listen and to yield, but I first wrote to her who had been my friend and told her how matters stood. She had no claim on him, she said; in fact, she had absented herself from London, and accepted a provincial engagement, in order to leave his path in life clear. We were married, and miseries for me soon began to thicken; he never ceased to upbraid me for separating him from the girl to whom he was first attached and who would, he said, have suited him far better than I did. I was so perfectly wretched that if I had even been told that he had left me and gone to her, I should have thanked my informant; but no one knew what had become of her, she had faithfully kept her word, and never crossed his path again. To do what little works of charity I could among the poorer members of my own profession was the only comfort

I had, and one day when I was visiting a poor girl in a very low neighbourhood, she begged me to go into the next room where a stranger lay dying. I did so. It was the very woman who for so long had passed out of our lives. I threw myself on my knees before her and told her all the history of my wretchedness and misery. Like the self-sacrificing patient martyr that she was, she took the blame home to herself. 'I had come between them and marred both their lives, but it was her pride and jealous annoyance when she first perceived that he had an admiration for me which had worked this evil for us all,' she said. I did what I could then to repair the mischief of which I had been partly the unwitting instrument. I brought him to her dying bed, and together we soothed her pillow; it was too late for more, but I had my reward even for that. He was kinder, gentler, than he had been ever since he had discovered his mistake, but my life was nevertheless blighted, because I was ever haunted with the knowledge that I

had made others suffer more keenly even than I did myself."

"Yet you could not help it, you must surely be held perfectly blameless," burst out Mimi, on whom the tale, bearing as it did a strong analogy to her own wretched history, made a striking impression; "and the girl, this friend of yours, she ought to be praised rather than censured; she meant to do her best for him, how could she help it if things did not turn out as she had expected?"

"Jealousy is not unfrequently at the root of such a self-imposed martyrdom, my child; we should all do well to ask ourselves searchingly our true motives in life, before we act on impulse. I am in the dark as to many points about your private affairs, my Mimi, and I have often wished circumstances would have allowed you to be more explicit with me. When I am gone to my rest," and she pressed Mimi's hand which lay on the coverlet as she spoke, "if there should be anything in the short tale I have just told you, which may

yield a lesson to you, for my sake consider it well."

"Oh, Mrs. Kelly, I should so like to tell you everything, you would advise me so wisely, but I am bound by a solemn promise; surely there must be circumstances under which it is not wicked to break it."

"Keep it, child. I shall pass away none the happier for carrying this secret with me, and you will ever have to regret a broken vow."

"I wonder if *she* did very wrong when she absented herself and left you to marry her old lover?"

"She made my life for years a misery and a torment, and heaped up wretchedness for herself," answered Mrs. Kelly, who had a sort of vague suspicion that Mimi, impelled by some feeling of obstinacy, was running away from happiness. During the few weeks they had been abroad together, she had gathered several fragments of the girl's history; and had she been spared longer on earth, she had hopes of one day working

out a happier issue to the course of events, than her young friend ever pictured to herself. This, however, as far as she was concerned, was not to be ; and she could therefore do no more than warn Mimi not to give way to what she imagined to be noble though falsely-directed motives.

“ I wish I knew what is the best to do,” wailed poor Mimi, “ but, Mrs. Kelly dear, you will not leave me yet ? ”

“ That is in the hand of God, my love, but you will think of me sometimes when I am gone ; and if earthly happiness, as I trust it will, dawns for you again, put up a small tablet to the memory of her who has prayed for you often, and so fervently wished you well through all your tribulation.”

“ Oh ! Mrs. Kelly, must I wait so long ? Is the last tribute of affection never to be paid ? ”

“ Labour strengthfully for the hour, my daughter, and it will come ere you expect it ; now let me slumber for awhile, for my forces are well-nigh spent, and I hope still

to have a few words of talk with my poor brother if he comes in time."

So Mimi, more pensive, more sorrow-stricken than ever, returned to her lone vigil by the fire, Naomi having meantime gone off about some household affairs. This, the last conversation Mimi was ever to have with her good friend Mrs. Kelly, had touched nearer on her own affairs than any that had gone before, and full many a time during that silent night did she ask herself whether she were indeed acting wisely in the course she was pursuing. In the morning the brother arrived, and Mimi intuitively shrank away to let them have their last farewell in private. It was some hours before she was summoned, and then the end was fast approaching; she was not even recognised by the devoted woman who had undertaken with life to follow her and her fortune wherever chance should lead them. A few minutes more and Mimi stood once again beside the dead, with despair lying like a dead weight at her heart, though her

external manner was marked by a calm composure that was almost alarming in its unnatural quietness. She kept her room for some days, eating occasionally the food old Naomi brought her, but rarely making any answer to the old woman's endearing lamentations. At last she was forced to grant an interview to the brother of her friend, who was compelled to go back to England on the morrow, and who pressed her to accept his services as an escort and to return to the land and friends she had but so recently left. But Mimi was firm in her refusal; "she must have change of scene, change of habits," she said; "she would wander about for a while with Naomi—at the end of a few months, perhaps, she would visit London again." Even with Mrs. Kelly's life-story before her eyes, as it ever was, she could not make up her mind to go back. "Edward Bazalgette must show some sign, especially if there were any truth in the report that he was now Lord Avebury. The tale about his love for that other woman must be

disproved before she could bring herself to seek him ; after all, their marriage had only been a civil one, (which, in her ignorance, she imagined to be by no means so binding, as if a religious rite had been performed). No, she would leave him free ; if he wanted her, he could come to her ; ” and yet, illogical and inconsistent as in her true womanliness she was, she resolved to make a journey into a part of the Continent into which neither news nor rumours were likely speedily to penetrate.

Exactly five days after the death of Mrs. Kelly, a few hours in fact after the brother had left her established, as he thought, in Paris for awhile, did she and old Naomi start for Frankfort, from whence Mimi hoped to reach eventually that country in the neighbourhood of the Black Forest where she believed some of her mother’s kin yet lingered, and after whom, now that she was virtually alone in the world, her heart seemed to yearn, notwithstanding her assertion that she wished to keep aloof from those of her own people and her own race.

CHAPTER VI.

DESPAIR.

THE most untidy of all the fusty dusty quarters that ever man lived in were Jenkins'. Papers upon papers, parchments on parchments, books on books, were strewn about over various tables in the most hopeless disorder, and yet a good deal of work arose out of this state of chaos. He was one of those strong-brained men who, entirely devoid of nervous weakness, never need repose; and though his intellects could scarcely be called vigorously developed, yet there existed a sufficient amount to give him that acuteness which was ready for every emergency, and to render him what

he himself called, "highly practical." He affected that everything should be done in a perfectly business-like way, and anything out of due course or verging on the romantic invariably called forth an amount of bad language which it were well not to repeat. He had devoted his time *con amore* to the unravelment of the knots in which Ted Bazalgette had involved himself, and, after careful study of all the difficult intricacies, he had discovered a way of "squaring matters and setting the young jackanapes on his legs again." According to Jenkins' light, old Jacobsen's death in no way simplified affairs ; on the contrary, his heirs and executors might be ten times more troublesome than he had been himself,—but they must be managed for all that. He knew nothing of the strong feelings which, mixed up in the whole matter, lay below the surface, and was consequently considerably astonished, not to say annoyed, by finding the business to which for some days he had given all his energies suddenly wrenched

out of his hands by everything being paid in full, "and by a woman," as he contemptuously added, whenever he told the story, as he did several times in the course of each day to the various members of his acquaintance whom he chanced to meet.

"Bad business, my good Sir—bad business when a young fellow goes a header like that! And no letter from me can reach him for ten days at soonest, and in the meantime the young woman has gone off the Lord knows where. Never heard of such a tale in my life, never. I wonder how it will all end, it is past my comprehension," but Richard Griesnach, to whom these words were addressed only responded irritably, "that he neither knew nor cared."

What were Edward Bazalgette's affairs to him, except in so far as they related to Pettita, and he never thought of him without regretting that he had been in any way instrumental in furthering matters to his advantage.

"Well, you need not be so deuced testy—if any one has to be annoyed it is myself;

after spending so much valuable time, how am I to be repaid, I should like to know?"

"Do you expect me to make it up to you because in a weak moment I introduced you to Sir Edward?"

"Certainly not, my dear man, certainly not. You belong to the bee-hive yourself—only drones pay, but you might make an appeal on my behalf to the baronet when he returns."

"I intend to have no communication whatever with him on this or any other subject, so you need not look to me for assistance."

"Offended, eh? dear me. I wonder what has happened?"

"Nothing, let us talk on other matters; there are some papers there in connection with the 'Argus' which require attention;" and Richard Griesnach, true to the determination he had taken to accept hard work as an antidote to much secret annoyance, turned to one of the littered tables in Jenkins' room, where he now found himself,

and went steadily into the statistics of the amount of benefit which had been effected in producing occupation for women by a college for their instruction and emancipation from feminine bondage, which had been formed in an out-of-the-way town in Ireland. Save for the painfully set wrinkles on his brow, the occasional nervous twitch in his keen clear eye, no one could have known that he was otherwise than fully engrossed by the topic before him, or that the very effort he was making to attend to it was of itself creating pain and trouble.

For an hour or more they steadily pursued their avocation, speaking on no irrelevant subjects, till at last they were interrupted by a very unexpected visitor. It was no other than Lord Avebury himself, who sent in his card and a request that Mr. Jenkins would grant him an interview.

“The young swell’s uncle — don’t go unless he demands a private talk.”

Richard Griesnach’s first impulse, however, was to depart at once and leave the coast

clear, but something impelled him to remain, and obedient to the instinct he sat down and went on with his calculations and his figures.

He looked up when his lordship entered and knew him again at once, having seen him casually at Mrs. Leigh's. The recognition, however, was not mutual, and Lord Avebury, who probably took him for a clerk, addressed himself to Jenkins with a sort of *hauteur* of manner which made Griesnach inwardly chafe, but which Jenkins, with his more vulgar ideas, ascribed to his superior rank and accepted forthwith with the blandest of smiles.

“You are, I think, arranging my nephew Sir Edward Bazalgette's affairs; as I am his nearest of kin and consequently more or less interested in the boy's welfare, I wish to know how much truth there is in the reports which have reached me?”

“About his debts being paid, my lord? True every word of it, upon my honour. Good-looking young man the baronet, my

lord, and what will not a woman do for a handsome man ! ”

“ Pshaw ! ” said Lord Avebury testily, to whom the answer was somewhat offensive. “ How did this scapegrace boy manage to involve himself so deeply ? Of what did his liabilities consist ? ”

“ Bills, my lord ; bills given to Jews—ruinous, always ruinous, you know. ”

“ Only bills ? I wonder why he did not apply to me for assistance. ”

Jenkins looked at him comically for a moment, as though he wondered whither this cross-examination was tending ; had he not been a lord probably he might not have received all the information he sought.

“ Well, there was rather a nasty difficult question about the same security being given twice over ; I should not mention it were you not his uncle, but it is all square now and no harm done. ”

Lord Avebury frowned.

“ Indeed—I am not a lawyer like your-

self, Mr. Jenkins, but were there any post-obits ? ”

“ The right term, my lord, the right term, you have hit it upon my word.”

“ In which I have no doubt that my name played a tolerably prominent part ? ”

“ Never heard it or saw it,—sacred word of honour, never ; ” and Jenkins chuckled. Here was the key which explained the reason of Lord Avebury’s visit : “ In fact, it is only in the most roundabout way that I was aware of the relationship which exists between your lordship and Sir Edward.”

“ I am to understand then that Sir Edward Bazalgette has not on any occasion been supplying himself with funds on the strength of what he expects to inherit at my death ? ”

“ Certainly not, my lord ; Mr. Griesnach here, who did me the honour of introducing me to the baronet, can substantiate what I say.”

Now for the first time Lord Avebury looked steadily at the little man, who had

been writing quietly all this time, then he held out his hand to him, and in a far more genial tone than that in which he had been addressing Jenkins, he said,

“I have great pleasure in making your acquaintance, Mr. Griesnach; I have heard of you frequently.”

Thus suddenly drawn into the conversation, Dick shambled to his feet and bowed his acknowledgments.

“I scarcely know to whom I am indebted for the honour of having been mentioned; my acquaintance with your nephew is but a slight one.”

“I have had the pleasure of meeting both your wards the St. Ormes, and it is scarcely likely that you would remain long unmentioned by them.”

Yet they had never talked of Lord Avebury to him, and this was strange. Then he remembered the party to the Abbey some weeks before, which he had discovered to his annoyance that Pettita had joined; and as he looked at the handsome soldier-like

man before him, a sudden fear seemed to pass over him,—even more than Sir Edward Bazalgette was this lord to be dreaded, if it should so happen that he admired Pettita. A weight fell on Griesnach even as one had just been removed from Lord Avebury's mind. It had galled and irritated his lordship considerably to think that Ted Bazalgette, whom he had always treated with the most affectionate regard, should have been anticipating his demise; and the knowledge that it was not so, and the discovery that he had been misinformed, had considerably improved both his temper and his view of things in general; hence his extreme civility to Richard Griesnach, for he remembered Pettita was not in the highest favour just then—the episode of the ring was rankling very uncomfortably in his recollection. He, however, put unpleasant memories on one side, and entered in his genial sociable way into conversation with Mr. Griesnach, who could not fail to respond, for no two men were ever more likely to get on together,

and even with the barrier which lay between them, the short half-hour they spent in Jenkins' chambers was not the most disagreeable they had ever passed. Both were intelligent and well-read, versed too, to a great extent, in the same sort of knowledge, and so they chatted on in a desultory way till Jenkins, who was nowhere in the conversation, and was fuming about like a "tiger in too small a cage," attracted Lord Avebury's attention.

"*Carramba!*" he exclaimed, "but I am hindering honest work I am afraid, what an infliction we idlers always are, we invariably forget that others have to work the machinery by which we benefit so largely! Good morning, Mr. Jenkins; when my nephew returns, as I suppose he will now he is free, it is scarcely necessary to inform him that I have inquired into his affairs."

He held out his hand to Griesnach.

"Will you dine with me at the Rag to-morrow?"

Griesnach flinched perceptibly.

“I never dine out,” he said somewhat shortly; “my health will not permit it.”

“Ah! I see,” said the other, as though at once accepting his appearance as a reason, “but we must meet, nevertheless. May I be allowed to look you up?”

Griesnach bowed and muttered something, but there was no cordiality in the reply.

Poor Dick listened in a dreamy sort of way to a long harangue from Jenkins of which he in reality heard but very little, and then shambled off into the street, repeating to himself as he went along,

“He sees,—he sees what? The immense gulf that lies between him and me.”

The subject of his own infirmities once brought vividly before him, all chances of farther work for that day were over; and Griesnach, once more alone in the solitude of his own private sanctum, gave himself up to the morbid despair which to a great extent was wearing away his vital energies, and had it not been for Margaret's influences

and judicious little words of warning and censure, would in all probability have committed even greater ravages than it did. For this day, however, he forgot all her lessons and sat down oppressed, tormented, worried by all sorts of hideous fancies from which he did not make the slightest effort to disembarass himself. Some presentiment seemed to come over him at the sight of Lord Avebury, and the more he was compelled to do justice to both the mental and physical attributes of the man he had just met, the more dejectedly he himself gave way to the very darkest broodings of that black despair which leads even to the gates of Hell itself.

For hours he sat there,—no one breaking in on his solitude. Griesnach's circle of intimate acquaintances was not a large one, and the few kind words which, spoken in due season, might have turned the current of his thoughts, were unuttered, and he lingered on in that state nearly akin to madness to which highly excitable natures

are so prone. If Margaret could but intuitively have learnt what was passing! But so it is in life, we know not each other's troubles. She was affectionately and heroically striving to amuse Pettita, who had grown even more captious and irritable since the tea at Lady Bluntisfield's than she was before. That Margaret had her private worries none who looked at her attentively could fail to see, but she was always calm and sweet, and went about where the young sister listed in the most unmurmuring, devoted manner, smoothing the rough places, binding up as tenderly as she could the frequent scratches, with even a mother's care and solicitude. And Richard Griesnach lay ill, crushed by a mental sickness beyond the reach of physic, prostrate too in body,—and she knew it not. Margaret had always thought that she could never love, that to watch Pettita and shield her from harm was her only mission in life. The bright hours fraught with the joys which spring only from a twofold happiness she imagined were

to be experienced only by the young one, on whom brilliancy and beauty had been so richly showered, and she herself was to stand passively by and watch them all unmoved ; now, however, she was becoming keenly alive to the fact that Richard Griesnach, who depended so much on her for counsel and support, had won his way into that heart of hers which she had deceived herself in thinking was of adamant. And yet she strove to school her feelings into submission and to brace her nerves as she listened patiently to his ravings over Pettita's beauty. She could not help him in the matter, could not help herself, and could only pray as she constantly did, that God in His infinite mercy would send peace to them both.

CHAPTER VII.

PARRIED THRUSTS.

To Edward Bazalgette, wandering about the Continent, there was an especial feeling of relief at being free for a while at least from worry. He had been so long haunted by the presence of debt, that anywhere on the civilised globe where he was likely not to hear about his pecuniary affairs was the spot of all others he was certain to choose; his secret marriage too was not a source of intense gratification to him, and, perhaps because he still loved Mimi as much as he did at the time he had persuaded her to forsake so much for him, their occasional and stolen interviews usually served to unsettle

him for days. To be away then from the whole thing was a pleasant change which, in the selfishness of his nature, he was resolved to enjoy as long and as freely as he could. Under these circumstances he did not hurry himself to reach the Bavarian town to which he had desired Jenkins to address his business communications, and full six weeks had elapsed before he presented himself at the post-office and asked for English letters. When he had obtained them, he put off breaking the seals till after dinner, so firmly persuaded did he feel that nothing but unpleasant intelligence was likely to reach him. The moment, however, arrived when suspense could last no longer, and the worst or the best as the case might be, must be ascertained forthwith. An exclamation of the wildest nature burst from his lips as he read, and the heavy German *habitués* of the little inn in which he found himself thought the young Englishman had suddenly become "*Geck*" as they would have expressed it in their vernacular, so excited was he as he

read more and more of the contents of these home epistles. Not once but many a time did he swear at himself for his idiocy, but it was useless to indulge in curses over the past ; to improve if possible the future was his wiser course, so without more ado he ordered horses, and as the shadows of evening were gathering slowly over the hills he started on his rapid journey. Without stop or stay, as Englishmen only do travel, he rattled on, "Homeward Ho !" the sole cry to which his heart responded ; and yet a little less speed might have been productive of greater advantage, for into the very village where Mimi and her old nurse had arrived two or three days after Mrs. Kelly's death, he dashed as fast as his somewhat blundering steeds would carry him, even stopped for water at the very hostelry in which she was dwelling. Yet he knew it not. The unusual disturbance in the house, however, did not fail to attract the attention of all its inmates, and to Mimi as well as to others the intelligence reached that a young English

lord was rushing home to enter on a large inheritance. Thus, with the usual distortion which facts undergo as they pass through many mouths, had the knowledge that Sir Edward's rapid journey was on account of money business been mercilessly twisted, but Mimi heeded but little what they told her; this man was naught to her, or at least so she fancied, and it was not till a day or two later, when she picked up a half-burnt piece of paper from which probably a cigar had been lighted, and in one of those fits of absence, to which she was very subject, unfolded it and saw the name that was only half-burnt away, that it dawned upon her that he who had passed so rapidly across her path was none other than the very man for whose sake she had deserted happiness and home.

"Gone to enter on his inheritance," whispered Mimi to herself; "it is well, the uncle then is indeed dead, and he will be happy with that bright-faced girl and ere long forget that I ever existed."

Arrived at length in London, and having disembarrassed himself of his wraps and travelling-bags, he started at once for the well-remembered quarters where the old Jew had dwelt. They were utterly deserted. In vain he rang repeatedly at the bell, nothing answered him but the surrounding echoes which the sound awakened; true, Reuben dwelt there still, somewhere in the kitchen or cellar, but he had gone out, and Sir Edward was compelled at last to turn away without any of the information he had hoped to gain, and without the slightest idea from whom he should seek it. For a few minutes he stood irresolute, then he jumped into a hansom and gave the order, "Belgrave Street."

Bertha Leigh had always been his friend, and he scarcely thought she would fail him now; if she could tell him no more than he already knew, she would at least quiet his perturbed mind with that magnetizing dreamy manner of hers.

"Ted Bazalgette!" she exclaimed, as she

almost rose from her sofa to welcome him, "we thought you were lost to us for ever, but how jaded and weary and travel-stained you look ! Have you but just arrived ?

"Only an hour ago."

"My dear boy, and you came first to me ; how good of you ! Let me ring at once for luncheon," but he held out his hand to prevent her.

"First tell me everything that has happened since I left."

"Really, but that is a very large order, I scarcely know where to begin. Your uncle was very angry at your sudden and mysterious departure, but that I do not suppose you mind."

"Indeed I do,—my dear good uncle, nothing ever vexes me more than displeasing him."

Mrs. Leigh shrugged her shoulders.

"Yet if report speaks truly you do not shrink from courting his displeasure."

"That is just what I want to know, what says report ?"

“You should scarcely come to me, as a lady—married it is true, but lonely now—and ask me these questions.”

“What folly, Mrs. Leigh! you and I are not in the habit of splitting straws that I am aware of—go on.”

She simpered and arched her eyebrows, then looked down at her work.

“You did not go abroad alone, I believe?”

Sir Edward sprang to his feet, and uttered a sufficiently strong oath for any other lady but Bertha Leigh to have resented it to the fullest. She, however, only said quietly,

“It is annoying, especially as Lord Avebury has taken it into his head to be very wrath, but people will talk, you know.”

“No one went abroad with me,—no one, I swear; who do people say it was?”

“My dear Ted, how should I know?”

“So it has reached my uncle’s ears. A fine jumble I have no doubt has been made out of the whole story. Well, my debts are paid, and that is something.”

“So I have heard, but the mode in which you have contracted them has also seriously annoyed your uncle.”

“What on earth do you mean, Mrs. Leigh, what has he got to do with the matter? The securities I gave in no way touched him—my poor old father might have risen out of his grave and cursed me for it, but Lord Avebury had no cause.”

“Well, it is a very unpleasant business, my dear Ted, and one which is, I am afraid, occasioning a good deal of talk.”

“Oh! I’ll put that all straight as soon as I see Mimi. You do not happen to know where she has gone, by chance?”

“I, my dear boy; what will you ask me next! Is she not abroad?”

“Oh! that is the insinuation, is it? Then once and for ever, Mrs. Leigh, I refute it.”

Again Bertha shrugged her well-developed shoulders.

“Well, I don’t care for talking about these things. I am, however, not adverse to helping you with Lord Avebury, who is as

you are aware a valued friend of mine, and I think I have more or less ascertained his sentiments on the subject. You must give up these vagaries, Ted, marry, settle down, and become respectable."

"So these are my respected uncle's opinions—he has been a long time showing the example;" and there was just the slightest inflexion towards Mrs. Leigh as he spoke. "Pray may I ask who is the lady he would suggest as a fitting wife for me?"

"Of course, my dear boy, you must choose for yourself; Lord Avebury is not the sort of man to do more than make a suggestion, but I think your marriage with Pettita St. Orme would be very acceptable to your uncle, if you yourself felt that it were possible. She has had money left her lately, as I think you know."

Sir Edward looked at her for a moment, and then said somewhat sternly,

"It is utterly and entirely impossible, Mrs. Leigh."

"Yet I think it would smooth away many

difficulties and heal over several annoyances. I shall be very sorry if you give it your positive veto," she went on in her persuasive way.

"Have you consulted the young lady? I do not think such a thing ever entered her head," he answered, laughing; for, notwithstanding the embarrassing position of his own affairs, he could not help being amused at Bertha's diplomacy.

"Oh! she would surely accept the honour with thanks; for a girl brought up as she has been, it would indeed be an elevation to become Lady Bazalgette. That little story about her mother too would scarcely prevent her from refusing any good offer, and she is a dear little puss, that you will allow."

"With the intensest gratitude I thank you for the suggestion, but girls with little stories about their mothers (not that I ever heard this one or have the slightest curiosity so to do), who would only marry me because I am a baronet and a supposed good *parti*, are not at all the class of individuals from

which I would seek a wife. I am aware you have been trying this ever since we first met at your uncle's; I told you then if you remember that it was a lost game. I must be loved for myself alone."

"How very romantic you are! but, nevertheless, you have never been sufficiently attentive to this young lady to discover whether she really cares for you or not."

"For the very best reason, that I believe all her feelings are centred on a totally different individual, even on the worthy representative of my maternal house, Lord Avebury himself," and Sir Edward looked Bertha straight in the eyes as he spoke.

For a moment that evil expression which she allowed but so seldom to be perceptible to strangers gleamed fiercely; then the habitual, almost stereotyped smile returned, for though she saw Sir Edward was too knowing for her, she had no intention of acknowledging it.

"You are mistaken. I am certain nothing is farther from both their minds."

“Oh! if you are in their secrets, well of course I cannot contradict, but I had thought otherwise; it is impossible to know what has happened during my absence.”

“No, indeed,” she answered looking down, “there have been some revelations.”

“How provokingly mysterious you are! I came at once to you as my best friend, hoping that you would put me thoroughly *au fait* with all that has taken place, and you only vouchsafe unpleasant hints and absurd allusions to things which never can be.”

“You wish me to put you right with your uncle. I have told you what I believe to be almost the only way,” and she broke off a piece of cotton from her lace-work and threw it spitefully into the fire.

“Marry Miss Pettita St. Orme or be on bad terms with my respected relative for the remainder of my life! Excuse me, Mrs. Leigh, but the alternative is too absurd.”

Bertha coloured up, she saw he was poking fun at her.

“I did not say it was an alternative, I

only said I thought he would like it, and you know you have got into terrible trouble in that quarter lately."

"Then the sooner I make my peace the better. I had hoped you would do it for me; no one has a greater influence over my lordly relation than you have."

She smiled and bowed.

"But, remember, it must be without conditions," he went on; "for reasons best known to myself I will never make this marriage, not even to please Lord Avebury."

"I wonder why," she murmured, "you are mysterious in your turn now; young, charming, and with a tolerable fortune, Pettita St. Orme is a match for any man."

"Do you really not know where Mimi Jacobsen has gone?" he asked as though tired of her importunities, and longing for some light to be thrown on what was to him a far more interesting subject.

"You do positively expect me to know everything; do you take me for a witch? Where should I have become acquainted

with this girl, belonging as she does to a totally different world from mine?"

"Yet she went frequently to Miss Fenton's, who is a great friend of yours; do you mean to assert that you have never seen Mimi?"

Now the lie direct Bertha always avoided, so she answered vaguely,

"I saw you walking with her once. Has she disappeared, did you say?"

"She has left the house where it seems her father died the very night I went abroad. I thought you might perhaps be able to tell me where she has gone to reside."

Bertha paused for a moment as though querying to herself as to which were the safer policy, then she said quietly,

"I believe she has left England and returned to her own people."

He bounded from his seat as though he had been stung.

"Poor Mimi! poor, poor Mimi! why did I go away and leave you thus! Yet how

could I possibly know that all these queer things were going to happen? I'll find you, though, if I hunt to the end of the earth."

"Good gracious, Ted! this is romance, or if I may be allowed to call it by its correct term, foolishness. You ought only to be too glad that you have got rid of a very troublesome appendage."

"Silence, Mrs. Leigh, don't talk to me in that mock-decorous manner. I am not at all sure that it is not owing to some of your evil machinations that this trouble has come upon me. By Jove! if I find out that you have had a hand in it, you shall suffer for it, my lady."

Bertha winced uncomfortably and grew pale; overt attacks were her especial dread, they were so difficult to parry.

"Except what you have told me yourself and what slight reports rumour has brought me, I know nothing of the girl."

"Of which slight reports that you have given a highly coloured edition to Lord Avebury there is but little doubt."

“I do not wish to praise myself, but Lord Avebury is, I think, scarcely the man to encourage scandal of this sort from a woman, even were I capable of amusing him with it.”

Sir Edward Bazalgette burst out laughing.

“By Jove! why everything has turned topsy-turvy during my absence.”

“You misjudge me grievously, Ted, and I am seriously hurt and vexed,” and Mrs. Leigh drew her dainty cambric handkerchief from her pocket and applied it to her eyes.

“Come, come,” he said, “I did not mean to annoy you, but I am so upset by all that has happened lately, that I scarcely know what I am doing.”

“I am sure I would help you if I could, but any faith you have ever had in my powers seems to have vanished,” and she withdrew the handkerchief with a little sob; “I too have been a good deal perplexed lately, life is very wearisome!”

“Granted, when one’s affairs don’t progress favourably. It is unfortunate we cannot assist each other, but it seems the only way in which I can help you is by marrying a pretty girl and thus taking her off your hands, and that, under all the circumstances, is, I repeat, quite impossible.”

“What are the circumstances, my dear Ted; I thought you had no secrets from me.”

“Well, I do not mind telling you if you are so particularly interested in knowing. I am already married,—have been for some months.”

She gave a little gasp and lay back among her cushions without speaking. This sudden and unexpected overthrow to some of her pet amalgamations for the moment paralysed her.

“You are astonished?” he asked looking at her comically.

“Hurt,” she answered recovering herself with an effort, “hurt, to think you should

have kept this secret from me so long, I who would have assisted you so gladly."

It was his turn to shrug his shoulders, and she went on,

"But Ted, dear, what will Lord Avebury say if your wife is, as I suppose, that Jewess? I believe it will break his heart."

"It is a great deal too tough to be broken so easily," he said laughing uncomfortably, for fond as he was of his uncle he had a vague dread of his anger, "but you will tell him for me, won't you?"

"I am half afraid," she replied; "he will be so very, so seriously annoyed,—and I who had promised to use all my woman's influence with you to prevent you if possible from getting into trouble with this girl. What a designing bad young woman she must be!"

"Thank you, Mrs. Leigh, that is quite enough," and he rose up angrily; "tell my uncle or not as best pleases you. I would make the fact known to him myself, only my time will be fully taken up in unravelling

the reasons of my wife's sudden departure, and in bringing her back to fill the position which she will grace so well."

"Really, Ted, you quite frighten me with your irritability. It is too bad to leave me to battle the storm with Lord Avebury."

"Oh! I have no doubt you will come off triumphant. Tell him to follow my example, and not to imagine I want either his money or his title."

Bertha coloured up, as she invariably did when any allusion was made to Lord Avebury's marriage, but she only said quietly,

"I could not presume to interfere in his lordship's private affairs, but I will do the best I can for you, you troublesome boy."

He kissed her hand with a sort of mock gallantry, and then dashed out of the house, resolved in his own mind to leave no stone unturned till Mimi was placed in her rightful position.

And Bertha sat on, thinking,—she was not

altogether surprised at what she had just heard, she had had a sort of idea that things might turn out as they had done, but she was none the less annoyed at having her suspicions turned into realities.

CHAPTER VIII.

CHECKMATED.

PETTITA unquestionably was vowed to perdition during the half-hour Bertha sat on after Sir Edward left her. The fact was, Mrs. Leigh was beginning to feel rather powerless and out of spirits as to the success of her various little schemes. "Lord Avebury was so very provoking; if she could only catch him again and make him speak, what would she care for that namby-pamby girl! She had only brought her on the scene as a bait to lure Ted Bazalgette from destruction for his uncle's sake, and now all the tables were turning against her—it really was too annoying." Not to give in, however, till the

very last was her determination, so she buckled on her armour, namely, smiles and bland words, and prepared to receive those of her acquaintances who should vouchsafe to pay her the usual Thursday's visit. Easter was just over, and London was filling fast, so the numbers were scarcely likely to be small, and Bertha, in the freshest and prettiest of toilettes, stood among the flowers in a small conservatory at the end of the room when the first guests were announced, and there was no shade of either anger or vexation on her smooth white brow, as she greeted them.

The St. Ormes did not appear ; Margaret rather discouraged very frequent visits to Mrs. Leigh, but Lord Avebury was among the earlier arrivals ; except in throngs he had rather eschewed Bertha's society of late, and this, perchance, was what galled her. She never let him perceive her annoyance, however, but was always demurely glad to see him.

“ Have you seen Ted ? ” she whispered as

they stood together for a moment, the Babel around preventing her words from being heard.

“No. Has he returned?”

“To-day only. I am terribly annoyed with him; in fact, I am so upset I did not think I should be able to appear.”

“Money as usual?” muttered his lordship with a shrug. “I wonder you trouble yourself so much about him; it is very good of you.”

“Oh! this time it is not money, but I cannot tell you now; wait,—when these people have gone you shall hear all about it. Ah! Signor Velardi, you are always true to my *matinées*. No; you need not look about the room,—poor Pettita, she is not here to-day; she has a disagreeable elder sister to look after her now. Come and dine to-morrow, and I will contrive to get her to meet you.”

“*Madame, votre bonté m'accable,*” answered the foreigner, bowing low over Bertha's hand, and thus failing to see the frown which

gathered on Lord Avebury's brow at these words, but over which she secretly rejoiced, for she knew the point of her poisoned dart had taken aim.

"She would win him yet," was her triumphant thought; "in that half-hour's conversation when the curtain had gone down on this Thursday's play, if she could not bring matters to a crisis, her belief in herself and her own powers would fade into nothingness for ever!"

And so she went about among her guests and fascinated them, as she invariably did, till at last "Marcia the tempestuous," as she sometimes called her, came with her noisy voice and loud manners into the room, and seemed as it were suddenly and effectually to destroy the harmony of the party. To a certain extent every one feared Marcia, she had such a nasty habit of speaking the truth and striking vigorously at the root of the numerous little daintily tended plants of "Humbug," which she was perpetually falling in with in the garden of Society.

On this occasion Marcia looked particularly business-like and important, it was very obvious that she had a mission to fulfil; unlike Mrs. Leigh she always went straight to her point,—circuitous roads and labyrinthine windings were modes of reaching a definite goal in which she had neither the patience nor the perseverance to indulge. She administered one or two smart little stings to several members of her acquaintance as she passed them, for Marcia was evidently not in the best of tempers to day, then with a rapid “Hè is here, so that is all right,” muttered to herself, she made straight for Lord Avebury, and holding out her hand forced him to give it a friendly shake.

Bertha saw, but was impotent to prevent, an old woman with a cracked voice and an endless series of lamentations was engrossing all her attention just then.

“I know you don’t like me, but for all that I mean you to listen to what I have to say,” began Marcia at once, addressing Lord Avebury in her usual off-hand way.

“My dear young lady,” he said apologetically, but she stopped him forthwith.

“Now, don’t talk nonsense ; when I have done you a good turn you shall pass your dictum, not before. Has Bertha told you anything ?”

“About what ?” he asked looking astonished.

“No, of course not ; she never can be straightforward. Now, I don’t wish to interfere in your family affairs, but I have just seen your nephew.”

“He has returned to England, so I have heard,” answered his lordship stiffly.

“Oh ! since you know that much, perhaps you are also aware that he is married ?”

“Married ! To whom ?” and Lord Avebury dropped his frigid manner and became considerably interested in Miss Fenton’s conversation.

“Well, that is just what I am half afraid of telling you ; yet, you know, justice must be done, so I thought I had better come to you at once, for you bear the character in

the world of being an honourable man, lord though you be. I am a horrid democrat, you know."

For the first time in his life Lord Avebury gave Miss Fenton his arm and led her to a sofa, where, a little away from the crowd of busy talkers, they could have a private chat without being overheard. Perhaps he half dreaded the revelation she was about to make; at all events he was determined to learn the truth if it were possible.

"Have I ever seen the lady?" he asked as they seated themselves. "Ted has scarcely acted fairly towards me in either this or other matters; I cannot imagine why the boy has so estranged himself."

"Well, you see, Lord Avebury, when a young fellow gets into a mess he always does the most incongruous things; at least that is my experience, and I have had a good bit. Papa's clients often come to me to help them. My father is a money-lender, you know."

Lord Avebury bowed.

“And has my nephew been throwing himself and his affairs on your tender mercies?”

“Oh! no, not exactly; his debts are all paid, but my father was one of his heaviest creditors.”

“Indeed, I had imagined the Jew Jacobsen was the man with whom he was chiefly involved; you see I know but little of Sir Edward’s affairs.”

“So it seems, and that is just why I think it is right that you should know more; there are a good many quicksands on the surface of this smooth-looking plain which you swells call Society, and if your lordship does not mind you will get into one up to your neck,” and she laughed noisily.

He did not answer her, words seemed to fail, this was a coarse mode of speech which was particularly distasteful to Lord Avebury, and which from her frequent indulgence in it made Marcia Fenton so odious to him.

“Oh! you do not mind, and think you can

take care of yourself, but I know you can't," she went on; "that is just the reason why I have constituted myself your protectress, though I do not know that it is altogether on your account."

Lord Avebury, being a man of the world, overcame with an effort his feeling of disgust, and sought to follow Miss Fenton's pleasantries in their own vein.

"Having so kindly taken my welfare into your consideration, perhaps you will generously tell me what you think it is so necessary I should know."

"Much. In the first place I tell you your nephew is married. Has been married for months."

"Well, but you have carefully concealed the lady's name."

"Mimi Jacobsen, the old Jew broker's daughter, is Lady Bazalgette—there it is out! I have no doubt it is a bitter pill, but you will have to swallow it, so better do it at once, my lord; recollect I am trusting to your sense of rectitude to see matters put

on a proper basis, otherwise I don't think I should have taken on myself the unpleasant task of enlightening you."

"Mimi Jacobsen, a Jewess of low birth! My poor sister, thank God she did not live to see this day;" and for a moment Lord Avebury passed his hand across his brow as though he were struggling with a strong emotion.

"She is a sweet loveable girl," said Marcia warmly, "and worthy to be a better man's wife than, I fear, Sir Edward is ever likely to prove. Men with vacillating weak natures such as his seldom make good husbands, but perhaps you would have preferred his marrying Pettita St. Orme?"

"Who? I! Miss Fenton, I never gave an opinion on the subject."

"Indeed, then *she* prevaricates largely," answered Marcia with a side look at Bertha.

"I am at a loss to understand your meaning."

"I have no doubt you are. You see I

started by telling you that there were breakers ahead. You have been shockingly humbugged, my poor lord, but then you men with all your vaunted superiority generally are. Do you mean to say that it is news to you that Mrs. Leigh has been moving heaven and earth for months past to get Sir Edward Bazalgette to marry Pettita St. Orme, and that to please you is the inducement she has held forth when she has brought her persuasive talents to bear on him."

"But this is quite impossible, Sir Edward has been away for weeks."

"And only returned to-day, when she began her little games at once; she was considerably sold, however, when she found he was married already. He came to me straight from his interview with her, and I resolved you should know it all forthwith. I am very sick of a good deal of the humbug I have seen going on lately."

Lord Avebury looked at her, but did not attempt to answer for the best of all reasons, he did not know what to say. He had

never had a very keen belief in Bertha's rectitude, notwithstanding the glamour which to a great extent she had cast over him with her fascinations. That she was as wicked and base as Marcia hinted, he could, however, scarcely bring himself to believe; yet as the recollection of much that had happened during the last few weeks seemed to flash like lightning across his brain, the sensation blinded him, and he seemed powerless to grope his way through the darkness.

Marcia was silent for a few seconds, she saw he was what she would have called "fumbling through a slough." He would right himself in a minute, she supposed, and then she trusted he would see things more clearly. She calculated wisely.

"If you will excuse me I will go and look my nephew up at once," he said at last, half rising.

"You will do nothing of the kind, because it is useless. Sir Edward has gone off abroad again in search of his wife, whom

Madam Bertha there has hunted out of the country."

Lord Avebury smiled; even to a middle-aged man, accustomed to the many vicissitudes of life, the whole story seemed too full of incident to be other than a fiction.

"Are you sure there has not been some misrepresentation?" he asked almost cynically, "some young ladies are fond of playing the heroine in a five act drama."

"You are right, they are, meaning of course Bertha," she answered laughing; "and as for misrepresentation, it abounds!"

Lord Avebury still looked incredulous; no man likes to feel he has been made a victim, and he would fain dwell on the idea that Marcia was mistaken.

"You are too provoking," she cried. "'Open your eyes and see the light' ought to be the gladdest tidings which can reach a blind man, but the fact is you have grown so accustomed to Bertha's shuffling prevaricating ways that you do not know darkness from light when you see it."

He contrasted the two women in his mind ; and, sad to relate, the comparison was unfavorable to Marcia, and as his eye lingered for a moment on Bertha he refused to believe evil of her.

“Truth invariably asserts itself,” he said somewhat ambiguously.

“Indeed it does, and that is exactly what it is striving to do now, only you will not let it.”

“Suppose I agree to follow your advice, what do you recommend ? ”

“That you should keep your eyes open and look out for squalls,” she said with her noisy laugh, “and, above all, not believe half the insinuations you may have heard or are likely to hear about Pettita St. Orme.”

Lord Avebury winced ; this last thrust told, though he did not choose to own what had really occurred.

“I will see what can be done,” he said, “but I must acknowledge you have asto-

nished and perplexed me a good deal. I must think the matter over before I can decide on any plan of action."

"One thing you will promise before I let you go, that you will receive my dear friend Mimi as your niece and not turn up your aristocratic nose at her."

"Sir Edward must speak to me himself on this matter."

"Nonsense, Lord Avebury, there are quite troubles and annoyances enough in the world without making unnecessary ones. She is young, beautiful, amiable, and rich,—what more do you want?"

"And has moreover a most eloquent partisan in Miss Fenton," he said gallantly, thus avoiding a direct answer.

But Marcia was not to be so easily thwarted.

"You want to go, I see," she exclaimed, "you are in a fearful state of fidget to be off, but it is no use; I'll have a promise first that Lady Bazalgette will be met graciously and without sneers when she arrives, and

that Sir Edward will have no naughty words hurled at him for his imprudence."

"When is this charming couple of whom you are so faithful an ally likely to put in an appearance?" he asked almost with a sneer.

"Heaven knows; after paying his debts Mimi went abroad, and where she is at this moment no one can exactly guess,—what she did it for I cannot imagine. I did not know they were married till Sir Edward told me this morning, and I fancied at the time that she had skedaddled out of some romantic folly in order to leave the coast clear for him with Pettita St. Orme or some other girl—there was always a good deal of the heroine about Mimi."

This fresh allusion to Pettita was met with a dark frown by his lordship as he rose from his seat.

"Then you will not promise to receive her affectionately and be kind to her?"

"She must first prove herself worthy—her reasons for running away seem myste-

rious; if she were really married to Sir Edward, it is scarcely likely she would leave him thus."

"If he is satisfied on that point, you have scarcely the right to cavil," said Marcia in her straightforward impudent way.

"Well, my dear Miss Fenton, I can only say let the matter rest for the present. I will promise to look into it, and must thank you for your friendly hints, though some of the intelligence you have imparted is scarcely pleasant."

"Only follow my hints, and you will live to thank me really with your whole heart," she said cordially as they shook hands.

Another moment and Lord Avebury was gone. That interview he had promised Bertha, had he forgotten it,—or did he purposely desire to avoid it? Perhaps he scarcely knew, but a longing for fresh air and the opportunity of communing with his own thoughts made him rush out into the street and wander listlessly on while he made up his mind to fifty different things

that he would do at once, giving them each up in turn as rash or impossible.

Bertha had not seen him depart, though she had been watching that *tête-à-tête* with Marcia as closely as circumstances would permit, wondering to herself the while what they could possibly have to say to each other. Marcia was standing beside her before she perceived that her companion had left her.

“Good-bye, Bertha, it seems one comes to see every one but you on a Thursday.”

“Yes, dear, I always have to talk to bores while my best friends are neglected. This is the very last season of these *matinées*; I really am not equal to them; besides, next year—who knows!” and her voice and her eyes dropped in unison. “What has he been saying to you?”

“He! who? Oh! Lord Avebury—not much, he has just gone.”

“Gone! where?” and she looked up briskly enough as she uttered these words.

“How should I know, unless it be to

find out why the St. Ormes were not here to day ! ”

Mischievous Marcia ! Beware how you rouse the latent tigress, or you will defeat your own ends.

But the flash, the evil look, and then the desperate struggle for self-control were exactly what Marcia wished to amuse herself by witnessing, and she chuckled accordingly as she heard Bertha's little soft “ Ah ! ” —striving so unsuccessfully as it did to convey that any attention Lord Avebury might bestow on Pettita St. Orme was a matter of the most perfect indifference to her. And yet after they were all gone, hours of anguish would be passed, hours which had come so frequently to Bertha of late, during which she cursed the cowardice which prevented her from annihilating with one blow the woman whose reputation it took so long to slay by covert slander.

CHAPTER IX.

STRAIGHT TO COVER.

WHEN Lord Avebury left Mrs. Leigh's house he strode determinedly along Piccadilly, cigar in mouth. A fate seemed to impel him onward, and with a rapid step he wended his way—whither? He certainly could not have answered the question himself.

“Away from Bertha for the present at all events,” was his sole thought. “To the Club? No, platitudes and gossip were beyond his mental grasp just then.”

He looked at his watch.

“Only just six o'clock. *Carramba!* if I could but catch him at home!”

And another five minutes found him driv-

ing quickly in the direction of Temple Bar. What did he, could he, want of Richard Griesnach? He could tell him nothing of Sir Edward's marriage, had probably never either seen or heard of Mimi Jacobsen in his life, and yet the idea of seeking Mr. Griesnach having once entered Lord Avebury's head, he resolved to carry it out without delay. Soon then he found himself walking through the quiet courts in search of the chambers where Pettita's guardian dwelt; a youth, half clerk, half secretary, came forward to speak to him as he entered. He looked grave, somewhat anxious, as Lord Avebury inquired if he could see his chief.

"Mr. Griesnach is very ill," was the answer; "so ill that I was just going in search of Mr. Jenkins, as I do not like the responsibility of remaining any longer with him alone. I think his friends should be communicated with, and I scarcely know who they are."

"Ill!" exclaimed Lord Avebury; "though I cannot claim a very long acquaintance with

Mr. Griesnach, if there is anything I can do, command me. I have had some experience of sickness when travelling in foreign lands."

The young clerk, who was considerably alarmed at his master's state, admitted Lord Avebury forthwith, only too glad to have met some one who would relieve him from being in sole charge.

Thus it came to pass that Lord Avebury found himself installed in the sick chamber where Richard Griesnach was lying, unconscious of what was passing around, but murmuring occasional and incoherent sentences, all of which were relative to the St. Ormes and their affairs. The excitement of the last few weeks had been too much for him, and the constant state of high-pressure in which he had been living had produced a nervous fever which would afford his friends anxiety for many a long day to come. Lord Avebury listened to what the young clerk told him about the doctor's orders, and then he sat down beside the bed to think.

Strange that he of all people should become this man's self-constituted nurse; why had Fate driven him here to-night, and what was to be the issue?

The sting some of Marcia Fenton's words had left was still teasing him unpleasantly, or he would at once have gone to Bertha and asked her to help him with her womanly instinct. Had he not for months past always gone to Bertha when trouble or annoyance made him long for a gentle voice and a soft kindly word? At this hour, however, he felt she would be sadly out of place there; he must prove the metal whether it really rang true or false before he could again use it, as he once had done, believing in its sterling worth. For a long time then he sat by the sick man's pillow, administering cooling draughts, seeking to assuage the fever on the aching brow, tenderly, gently performing offices of love for a man who a few days before had been a perfect stranger to him. And there was something in the scene which seemed to soothe Lord Avebury himself; it

was a work to do, a valve which assisted to pass off the numerous annoyances which had been tormenting him of late.

As the evening wore on he sent the clerk away and determined himself to watch during the long hours of the silent night; it was not the first time that he had robbed himself of sleep and had devoted himself to nursing a sick stranger, but that had been, as he had said, in foreign lands. Now it was rather a selfish whim than an act of Christian charity which bade him do it for Griesnach.

But little sleep came to either of them; and poor Dick, as he tossed about in delirious wakefulness, talked incessantly of "the child," little knowing who he was who sat and listened to his ravings.

When the morning at last broke into the dingy room, it would have been difficult to say which was the more haggard of the two; the sick man's face as he lay on his bed of feverish pain, or the countenance of him who had watched so faithfully through the still hours.

“Thank God he has not recognised me,” was Lord Avebury’s ejaculation when he at last heard footsteps in the outer room and prepared to resign his seat to the young clerk who had just arrived, telling him as he did so that he would send a proper nurse in the course of a few hours, as Mr. Griesnach he feared was more ill than they had either of them imagined.

Back to his rooms in St. James’ Street for a cold bath and some breakfast; yet Lord Avebury scarcely looked his calm courteous self—strange too, for he was vigorous, even in the very zenith of his strength, and not unused to trying his physical powers. He seemed, however, on that especial morning to be as unnerved and pallid-looking as an hysterical girl who in four or five consecutive nights of dissipation has danced all her strength away, as girls have a way of doing in this rapid nineteenth century of ours.

Altogether too he was very irresolute and irritable, began a letter twice or thrice, each

time tearing and burning what he had written, then pacing about the room and sitting down again to think; once his hand was on the bell to bid his servant pack for a foreign tour,—but no, he would await passively whatever adventures or misadventures should arise.

As far as we poor short-sighted mortals see, on what a mere thread seems to hang our futures of happiness or misery—a note,

“Dear Lord Avebury,

Will you dine with me to-day 7.30 sharp? I have something IMPORTANT to communicate.

Your's truly,

BERTHA LEIGH.”

He wrote an affirmative.

“Eight hours,” he muttered to himself, as having despatched the messenger he looked about for his hat; “how many things *shall* have occurred by then, if I have any power over the direction of my own destiny. No, I will not go abroad; I will stay like a

man and meet my fate,—now to find a nurse for Griesnach.”

That fact accomplished, which in London is but the work of half an hour, there was evidently another task which Lord Avebury had set himself, and from which nevertheless he flinched.

The St. Ormes must be made acquainted with their guardian's state ; true, he could have rid himself of the whole business by desiring Jenkins to be the bearer of the news, but something told him this was neither kind nor politic, and having also torn up all the letters he had begun to Margaret on the subject, he determined to call and see her himself. Few things perhaps could have surprised her more than the sight of Lord Avebury as he strode, pale and stern-looking, into their little drawing-room. Pettita had gone out as usual with Marcia Fenton, and Margaret was alone—a good turn from the hands of Fortune which his lordship had been asking perpetually during the last ten minutes.

“Something is wrong,” she exclaimed, “what is it?”

“Or you think I should not be here—do you regard me only as the herald of ill?” he asked somewhat bitterly.

“No, no, Lord Avebury, but you look so sad, so changed since we met at Lady Bluntisfield’s.”

“There are vicissitudes in life, and they do not always tend to brightness, my dear Miss St. Orme. Have you seen your guardian lately?”

“Mr. Griesnach—no, not for some days,” and Margaret grew so deadly pale that Lord Avebury, as he looked at her, felt he had undertaken a far more difficult task than he had at first expected. Had he not selfishly believed that all the annoyance, the bitterness, lay with himself alone? As he observed Margaret’s changing colour, however, he scarcely knew how to proceed. He waited for a moment.

“What has happened?” she asked, “tell me, and quickly,” and there was a little

gasp in her voice which all her efforts at composure failed to hide.

“I have just left him, he is not very well, I trust it is nothing serious. I thought, however, you might like to know, in case you should wish to send any little delicacies,” and he talked on hurriedly to give Margaret time to recover herself, though he was scarcely less discomposed than she was,—this was a fresh tangle in the skein of events.

“Alone and ill,” she muttered. “Oh! Lord Avebury, you know the world better than I do, do you think I might go to him? He was my father’s oldest friend.”

“He has a nurse with him by this time, a good kind Sister whom I have sent. There can be no reason why you should not go yourself if it will afford you any satisfaction.”

“A nurse!—then he is very, very ill,” and Margaret began mechanically to put away the work on which she had been engaged, but she looked like a blind person groping

in the dark, and there was something awed and still about her whole manner which thoroughly impressed Lord Avebury, who, however, scarcely regretted that he had come himself when he discovered that she cared far more about the intelligence he had brought than he had anticipated.

Could he have been mistaken as he listened to Griesnach's unconscious wanderings, was it not Pettita's name he ever uttered with such fondness? Was Margaret after all the heroine of a romance which had sprung up in such a very unexpected quarter?

"I will accompany you if you will permit me," he said diffidently, after he had for a few moments witnessed her calm despair.

"Thank you, it will be very kind," and Margaret's voice sounded like that of someone far away.

"Shall we leave a note, a message for your sister, to tell her where we have gone and what has happened?"

She looked at him dreamily.

“It will not matter much to Pettita, she will be sorry, that is all, but you can do as you like.”

So they went together, and few words were spoken by either. Each had private thoughts which were all-absorbing; it seemed as if to both of them a startling episode in life was tending to its close.

Lord Avebury sat in the study while Margaret and Sister Mary Ursula were together in the sick man's room—and what were his reflections the while? During the last few hours much had been disclosed, and it was scarcely to be expected of human nature, kind-hearted and good though Lord Avebury was, that he should think as much of what was passing there as he did of his own affairs. He did not, however, have long to ponder peacefully, for Jenkins came fussing in in his usual noisy style, and then stopped, overcome with polite confusion when he saw “his lordship.” He had not previously heard of Richard Griesnach's illness, but not having received certain

articles which had been promised to be ready for the printer by this time, he had arrived in hot haste to expostulate. The intelligence of the little man's prostrate condition seemed quite to paralyse him.

"What was to be done? The paper must stop, and all their previous hard work would go for naught; as to starting it again, that was impossible, lost ground could never be regained."

Lord Avebury was somewhat disgusted as he listened to him, the greater consideration surely was poor Griesnach's suffering, but this to Jenkins was nothing in comparison with what he called, "a blighted opening," which must inevitably occur if this paper were not carried on.

They were deep in argument about what was to be done when Margaret came into the room. She looked cold and calm and grave; only Lord Avebury, who had seen her when she first heard of Mr. Griesnach's illness, knew the immense amount of self-control she was striving to exercise. She

listened in silence to their conversation, attentively marking Jenkins' reiterated regrets over the ruin that would come to both of them if this newspaper were stopped, and his assurances that, "upon his honour he did not know where to lay his hands on a man who could carry it on *pro tem.* without being troublesome afterwards,—as for himself he had no time,—no time. 'Twas not that he could not do it, but time—could not make it elastic like a stocking, could you?"

At last Margaret spoke.

"I will gladly do some work if you will show me what to do."

"You will, now that is delightful, Miss St. Orme. Griesnach always says you have the clearest head for business he ever saw—beat him hollow any day."

She bowed. Margaret had seen Jenkins once or twice when the discovery about their money had been made, and she was scarcely prepossessed by his rough manners, though she believed him to be honest and sterling.

“Are you not undertaking more than considering present circumstances you will be able to perform?” asked Lord Avebury, gently addressing Margaret. “From what our good friend here tells me, newspaper editing is no slight work.”

Margaret blushed.

“Pray do not imagine that I think myself equal to so onerous a task,” she said; “I only meant I would help, copy anything, arrange papers, etc., under Mr. Jenkins’ supervision. I have already done it before when Mr. Griesnach has been unwell.”

“All right, all right, we’ll work it, my dear madam; upon my word I feel quite in spirits about the ‘Argus,’—let me instal you at once in Griesnach’s big chair.”

“Thank you, I am going home,” she answered coldly, “my sister will be expecting me? Will you kindly come at four o’clock and bring the papers?”

Jenkins was thoroughly taken aback.

Here was a young woman who kept him in his proper place, an indignity he would

have resented only he remembered she had offered to work the 'Argus,' and moreover that haughty lord stood by.

"Sister Mary Ursula will nurse Mr. Griesnach better than I could do, and you will bring me news of him, will you not, Lord Avebury?"

"Assuredly," he answered as he rose to accompany her home.

"One word, my lord," struck in Jenkins, "your nephew has come back and is married I hear."

"So I believe," was the cold reply.

"Perfect romance, pity we cannot print it, he came to me yesterday and told me to seek information anent the wife. 'Jenkins' private inquiry office,' if all other trades fail, I shall try that," and he laughed noisily.

"Good morning, Mr. Jenkins, I must not keep Miss St Orme waiting."

And Jenkins was left alone to waste at least five minutes of his valuable time in abusing the high manner and insolent bearing which some people chose to assume.

· Once more arrived at the tiny house the St. Ormes had taken for the season, Margaret held out her hand; kind though Lord Avebury had been to her, she would not ask him to enter, but he had no idea of being so cavalierly dismissed.

“May I not come in? I should like to see your sister,” he said smiling. How could Margaret refuse, especially as she could not bring herself to doubt those honest eyes!

So they went both of them upstairs, where lying reading in her usual graceful attitude on the hearthrug was Pettita.

CHAPTER X.

TRUTH WILL OUT.

SHE started to her feet with a little cry.

“Lord Avebury—Madge!” and the crimson colour came and went, and Pettita’s brown eyes shone with a sudden brilliancy. She asked no questions, but looked from one to the other as though waiting to be told what had occurred.

Margaret was the first to speak.

“Mr. Griesnach is very ill. Lord Avebury came to tell me and has kindly accompanied me to see him.”

“Poor old Dick, I am sorry, he seems to be always getting ill,” but she did not say it as if she were much interested, only

intensely puzzled over what Bertha would have called "the amalgamation."

Altogether everybody looked a little awkward, the polished man of the world no less so than the two girls. He had evidently no intention however of beating a hasty retreat, for he sat down and taking up the book over which Pettita had been poring, he made some trivial remark about it. Margaret, whose hospitable instincts were ever on the alert, asked him to stay to lunch; he accepted at once; still the conversation flagged, till presently he asked,

"Have you seen your friend Mrs. Leigh lately, Miss Pettita?"

"Not since Lady Bluntisfield's tea."

"Indeed; I thought you and she were inseparables."

Pettita looked so uncomfortable that Margaret came to the rescue.

"I am afraid I am to blame," she said, "I cannot bring myself to care for Mrs. Leigh, and though it was very kind of her to have Pettita with her for so long, yet

from what I have since heard I would much rather they were not great friends, ungrateful though it may seem."

"Indeed!" he replied with some astonishment. "I do not think you would act without a good reason; may I be taken sufficiently into your confidence to be told what it is?"

"Madge, Madge, Lord Avebury is a great friend of Mrs. Leigh," cried Pettita, dreading what her sister's truthful tongue might reveal.

"I hope I am the friend of truth and justice, my dear Miss Pettita," he said, addressing her with some gravity, "and I have my suspicions that they have not been altogether in the ascendant of late; please tell me, Miss St. Orme, what has Mrs. Leigh done to aggrieve *you*?"

"Oh! she has never annoyed me personally," answered Margaret, who was becoming rather confused; she had not expected that the conversation would take so serious and inquisitorial a turn; "she tormented and

worried the child there a good deal, so I thought it was wiser to keep her away, that is all."

"Just what I suspected," muttered his lordship, twirling his moustache rapidly and fiercely through his fingers; "Bertha Leigh and I must have an explanation."

"No, Lord Avebury, no," and Pettita sprang from the chair where she had been sitting very quietly for some time and stood flushed and excited before him.

He took her hand.

"My sweet child, months ago by the old well in the Abbey grounds, I told you, if you remember, that clouds were gathering thickly around; can it be possible that we have both been foolish enough to allow ourselves to be overtaken by the storm?"

"I don't know," she said; "I only know that I am very miserable, and I wish with all my heart that I had followed Madge's advice and had never come near London."

"That sentiment I will not echo, but I think your sister is quite right when she

says Mrs. Leigh is no fitting companion for you. The workings of her mind are far too subtle for you to follow them."

"Do you understand them?" she asked, looking at him archly. She was just a little piqued, and wondered whether he were going to renew the old story about her being a baby.

"No, indeed I do not," he answered decidedly; "if I did, it would not be necessary that I should have come here to ask forgiveness to-day."

"Forgiveness, Lord Avebury, for what?" and she snatched her hand from his and walked away to a little distance. "Then you did say those cowardly, unmanly things which have made me feel humiliated ever since I heard them; no, it is no use asking, I cannot forgive that!"

He looked at her sternly for a moment, then he said angrily,

"Bertha Leigh has dared too much;" and the storm that swept across his brow half-frightened Margaret as she watched it.

Pettita did not see it, she had gone away into the tiny back drawing-room, and had thrown herself down on a sofa to hide among the cushions her crimson face and brimming eyes. He did not attempt to follow her, but addressed himself to Margaret,

“Miss St. Orme, will you not tell me the truth, it will be happier for us all.”

Thus appealed to, Margaret did not flinch, but, even as Pettita had related it to her, she told him all Bertha Leigh had said on that evening when the demon of jealousy had been so thoroughly aroused within her. She did not even hide the allusion to their mother's early career, though she dropped her voice, if possible to spare Pettita. He would not let her proceed, however.

“I know, I know,” he whispered, “Griesnach's wanderings last night revealed it.”

Margaret looked at him with questioning eyes; for his only answer he took her hand and pressed it; her secret too—yes, it was safe in his keeping.

“Poor Mr. Griesnach,” she murmured, “but I did my best for him.”

“Like the true heroine you are; now please will you do your best for me, Margaret?—we must learn to help each other.”

“You must do your own wooing,” she said, striving to smile though a sick cold feeling lay at her heart.

Richard Griesnach,—she saw it well,—as far as he was concerned the drama was nearly played out. If he should recover, and Margaret shuddered as she thought of the doubt, what would be his feelings when he learnt what had happened? She felt thankful to Lord Avebury for all he had done, but at the same time she could not help thinking he might have chosen another opportunity for seeking his own happiness, than at the very moment when the man who would be so crushed by it was lying on a bed of pain, perhaps of death.

“Pettita must decide,” he said, answering her gravely; “this suspense is no longer

endurable. Tell me, for you must know, she does not care for — ”

“ Ask herself — she is there — why should I constantly be tormented thus ? ” said Margaret querulously, not allowing him to finish the sentence.

She felt she could bear no more, and Lord Avebury, guessing as he did her secret, had no right to torture her thus.

He looked at her for a second in astonishment, regretting that he had pained her, but he had no time to speak again, for she was gone,—well disciplined though her feelings were, they were growing impatient of all control, and in the privacy of her own apartment only did she dare to let the inward storm rage itself out.

For a few seconds there was silence in the room where Margaret had left the two ; then he walked up to the little sofa where Pettita still sat trembling from head to foot.

“ My darling,” he said as he leant over her, “ will you forget Bertha’s false words and go back to the Abbey well with me ? ”

“Then they were false, you will assure me that they were false?” and she looked up inquiringly.

“As false as the whole story she told *me* of your flirtations and intrigues.”

“My flirtations and intrigues, Lord Avebury, how dare she? Why, I never flirted or intrigued with any one in my life.”

“Neither did I ever utter one word of calumny against you, my sweet love,” and he tried to take her hand, but she withheld it.

“Oh! but you believed that I was naughty and a flirt, and that was very nearly as bad of you. I don’t like any of your London ways at all. Madge is quite right; the country is a very much better place.”

“So I think,” he answered smiling. “How bright the Abbey will look with your fair face and joyous voice to gladden it; it wants a mistress, you know.”

For all answer she put her head down once more among the cushions.

“Nay, nay, dearest, don’t say you will

not forgive, let us forget Bertha Leigh for ever." And there was a scowl on his brow as he uttered her name, but he brightened as he went on, speaking as though resolved she should no longer mar his happiness. "You do love me just one little bit, do you not?"

This time she gave him her hand, but still hid her eyes.

"Look at me, will you not, my own Pettita, and tell me you believe in me and trust me?" there was something in his tone which made her look up instantly,

"I should never have doubted you if *she* had not stood between us."

And so at last Pettita was wooed and won. The bridge which had divided them once crossed, she chatted and laughed and told him all her little troubles glibly and cheerily enough, while he sat with his arm round her listening, and for the time at least they had no thought for any other being on earth — those two.

At last she drew the ring from her pocket where she carried it in a little dainty case.

“You will take it now,” she said, “or shall I wear it for your sake?”

For a moment he looked grave again.

“Do you really in your heart believe it came from me?”

“From whom else should it have come?” she asked ingenuously; “I never had another love,” and she looked down shily, too unaccustomed as yet to speak freely of her new position.

“I did *not* send you the ring,” he answered seriously, almost sternly, “though I recognized it at once. It belongs to my nephew Sir Edward Bazalgette.”

“Oh! then it must be a mistake altogether,” she cried laughing, “or I dare say a joke to mystify me; he has gone abroad again, Marcia Fenton tells me, and when he comes back we will request him to take better care of his property.”

“A woman brought it to you, you say. I suspect there is something more in the matter than a mere joke.”

“Now, pray don’t frighten me by hinting

at any more plots," she cried, "I have had quite enough of them. Do you know I had determined to go on the stage, and should have done so very soon if all this had not happened to-day. I always wanted to before I even saw you. I wonder whether you would have loved me then;" he did not answer her and she went on, "I don't think I shall ever want it any more; I have had quite a little drama of my own, haven't I?"

He leant over her and kissed her.

"And it is not quite played out yet," he said; "there is an act to be got through with Bertha Leigh."

"I thought we were to forget her."

"Afterwards," was the brief reply.

"Oh! you are not going to do anything dreadful; you are resolved to frighten me to death."

"Words cannot kill," he said bitterly; the remembrance of Bertha seemed to have the effect of making Lord Avebury instantly cold and stern.

“Can they not?” she asked, “they stabbed me almost to my death.”

“My poor pet, don’t let us think about the unpleasant past any more to-day. Put that ring back in your pocket, or better, on your finger if you like; by that means we may, perhaps, discover the reason of the gift.”

She did as he desired her, and they went on talking about hundreds of little nothings all bearing reference to themselves and their future, while occasionally Pettita would utter a regret over poor old Dick’s illness.

“I wish he could have come here to-day; he would have been so glad for me,” she said.

But there was a comical expression on Lord Avebury’s face—the only recollection which marred his present happiness was that of Richard Griesnach, who, from what he had learnt during that long night, had, he believed, as strong an affection for ‘the child,’ as he had himself, and who was lying

sick perhaps even unto death while he was winning from her bright smiles and loving words.

“Why do you look like that?” she asked. “You think he would not care. I am sure he would.”

“Perhaps he would have cared too much,” said his lordship hesitatingly.

She looked up at him, and read his meaning in his eyes.

“Nonsense,” she said, “you are a nasty vain man, because you love me yourself you think every one else is as weak. If old Dick cares for either of us, it is for Margaret; poor old Madge, I hope she may one day be as happy as I am now.”

“Amen,” echoed her companion, “but still I think you have a little bit miscalculated matters.”

“I am sure I am right,” she said saucily; “I was teasing Madge about it only the other day.”

“Well, my darling, we can but hope things will have a happy issue.”

“What ! do you think poor old Dick is going to die ?”

“God forbid, though he is very ill.”

“You’ll go and see him after lunch, won’t you, and come back and tell Madge how he is. We must do as we would be done by in this world, mustn’t we ?”

“Yes, darling, when we can.”

“And tell old Dick from me to get well very quickly. I want to have a talk with him.”

“About —? You are to have no secrets from me now, you know.”

“Well, you might trust old Dick,” and she laughed; then she grew more serious. “I want him to tell me who my mother was; he was an old friend of my father’s, therefore he must know.”

Lord Avebury pulled her head down on his shoulder, and kissed her brow.

“She was a bright young beauty, like yourself,” he said; “your father loved her and devoted his life to her, as I hope to devote mine to you; more than this all

the Dicks in Christendom will not tell you."

"Then, why did Bertha Leigh hint —"

"Things of which she knew nothing. Have we not agreed to pronounce her false? Here comes Margaret, she evidently thinks we must have worn out our tongues as we have her patience by this time."

She entered cold and pale looking, the agony had passed away but not without ravages, Lord Avebury went up to her and kissed her.

"Let me be a brother to you always," he said earnestly, and a bond of union for life was sealed between them, and Margaret felt that come weal come woe she would have a firm staunch friend in her young sister's husband.

After luncheon Pettita sent him away to inquire after Mr. Griesnach, and the two girls sat together almost silently during his absence; the one all absorbed in her new happiness, the other almost crushed, although she dared not own it, by the great misery

that had come upon her. Occasionally Pettita would start up and in her loving impulsive way throw her arms round Margaret's neck and call her every endearing name she could think of, but this served rather to augment than mitigate the other's grief, though she strained every nerve to appear happy for Pettita's sake.

Lord Avebury came at last; he had seen the doctor, Mr. Griesnach was no worse, but some days must elapse before the crisis arrived,—days that Margaret knew scarcely how to face.

Four o'clock brought Jenkins and the 'Argus,' and while the two newly-declared lovers sat chatting over their future plans in the back room, Lord Avebury frequently disregarded Pettita's words while he listened for a few moments to the determined business-like way in which Margaret was mastering the knowledge of how the 'Argus' was to be carried on, admiring,—commending,—applauding her in a way which made Pettita at last exclaim,

“If it were not dear old Madge, indeed I should be very jealous.”

The happiest hours must, however, end sooner or later; he looked at his watch.

“Six thirty, I must be off.”

“You will come back to dinner?”

“I cannot, love, I have an engagement.”

She looked up pouting with inquiring eyes.

“To-morrow you shall be told,” and so with a kiss he left her, strode rapidly down the stairs, closed the street door after him with a slam,—and now for Bertha Leigh!

CHAPTER XI.

A FRESH SCOURGE.

FOR days after Mimi had picked up the envelope bearing Sir Edward Bazalgette's name, she was so silent and reserved that Nurse Naomi grew alarmed for her health. Old memories had indeed been awakened—the sight of that well-known name written by a strange hand, the feeling that he whom she loved even to the extremest limits of self-forgetfulness had been so near her, but yet had passed away again, perchance for ever, was almost more than she could bring herself to understand and bear. If it had only been allowed that she should have seen him, would she not have held

out her hand and bid him stay? But now he was gone, and she was struggling with her woman's pride on the one side, which bade her sit down patiently and show no sign; while, on the other, her deep love asserted itself, and tempted her to follow him back to England, for—was he not her husband? Week followed week, however, and still she did not move farther than to take her solitary walks in the surrounding country, whose wild loveliness seemed to accord with those inward surgings which she sought so vainly to keep in subjection. She came home at whimsical hours, and ate the food which it was Naomi's care to provide, but she paid little attention to what was being said or done around her; and time passed on—surely, almost rapidly,—there were no striking events to mark it. To Naomi it was a miserable epoch in her existence, and she wished herself well out of it with all her heart;—true she had an abundance of old village croons to gossip with, but the life was quite different from any

she had been accustomed to, and the child she had nursed and loved from babyhood was so wretched and unhappy, it was quite grievous to see her. If she had only known how to write, she would have penned a letter to Sir Edward Bazalgette himself, angry though she had every reason to believe that this course would have made her young mistress. As it was, she determined ere long to get one of her numerous acquaintances to send a few lines to Reuben; "even if the Fräulein were displeased, what matter? it would be for her good in the end."

And while Mimi was leading this tranquil monotonous life in her out of the way German village, where was Edward Bazalgette?

After he left Mrs. Leigh he sought Jenkins, who could tell him nothing, but to whom, as we know, he gave directions to make every inquiry after the absent Mimi; then he paid Marcia Fenton a visit, where he received the intelligence that Mimi had gone abroad with Mrs. Kelly, though their

address for the present, at all events, Marcia had not got. She comforted Sir Edward by assuring him that she did not believe there was any mystery about the matter. "Caprice had taken her on a tour—caprice would bring her back again—he had only himself to blame—if a man rushes away and leaves a pretty woman to her own devices, naturally the sting of neglect will prompt her to do some wild thing."

Such was Marcia's worldly reasoning; and though it calmed Sir Edward's fears about Mimi, it did not serve to improve his temper when he thought the matter over; and when he pondered on her words, he almost resolved to give up the chase and sit down calmly to await his wife's return. But the natural impetuosity of a youthful and impatient temperament soon made him relinquish the quiescent plan; in the course of a short time he made a successful descent on Reuben, and having bribed him into giving the Parisian address, he started once more for the French capital, having only been four-and-twenty

hours in London. But Mimi had been gone more than a week, and Ted Bazalgette was once more utterly at fault, so he resolved to stay in Paris for awhile and leave events to unravel themselves. He had a notion that Mimi was not very far off, and that he should fall in with her some day, so he wrote a few lines to Marcia Fenton, begging her to keep him *au courant* with what befell in England, while he in the meantime wandered about Paris in a vague desultory sort of way — one half-hour swearing at his luck in desponding accents, the next starting rapidly down the streets on a wild-goose chase after some female form which he had deluded himself into believing resembled that of Mimi. Altogether it was a wonder that he was not taken up by the police, tolerably vigilant as it is in those parts, but he was evidently regarded as ‘*un pauvre jeune homme*,’ who would probably end his days in the ‘Hôpital des Fous,’ and so let off undisturbed. When some little time had passed away, however, Ted Bazalgette

began to grow seriously alarmed. He had at first been almost more angry than anxious, regarding the whole affair somewhat from Marcia's focus ; but really it was getting past a joke, he thought,—and if Mimi had intended to prove Sir Edward's love by her prolonged absence, she would have succeeded beyond her most ardent desires. If he had found her speedily, he would probably have scolded, raged, and fumed over the stupidity which could concoct so vile a plot to tease him ; but now that he was bewildered and tormented by torturing fancies, the sight of Mimi alive and well would be hailed as the brightest, cheeriest moment of his life. But she came not, and no tidings reached him. Letters from England brought him the news of his uncle's engagement to Pettita, and he chuckled as he thought of Bertha's discomfiture. He, like Lord Avebury, had got a grievance to settle with her, for he was firmly convinced that it was her troublesome interference which was now plunging him into so

much anxiety and unnecessary annoyance. In fact, the thought of Bertha Leigh's face when she was first told of that wedding that was to be, was the only real amusement Sir Edward had had in Paris, and he laughed and laughed over and over again in a way that quite decided the people round him that he was hopelessly mad ; they even went so far as to ask each other in whispers if he were not becoming dangerous.

“ All this is, no doubt, great fun for his lordship,” he muttered to himself one morning, after he had received a long letter from England, containing an account of festivities which were in prospect, “ but I do not care much about anything till I have found Mimi, —though, by Jove ! if she were jealous of Pettita, this may bring her out of hiding. Stop a bit, Mrs. Leigh, you and I have not done with one another yet. By the holy poker, there is Reuben ! ” and, three at a time, he dashed down the steps of the Hotel, and with rapid strides reached the corner of the street where Reuben was standing.

“What news — what news?” was the impatient query.

“Hein! The Herr is eager!”

“Of course I am—have you found her—tell me?”

“Reuben has risked much to come here; the journey is long and dangerous.”

“Not more dangerous for you than for other people, I suppose. What do you mean?”

“Germans are not yet over-welcome in French territory.”

“Bah! there are plenty of them about, nevertheless”

“Reuben neglects his work in the Herr’s cause.”

“Oh! I see. Pay first—tale afterwards. You are a leery dog; a little kicking would not hurt you, only I want your news.”

In return for Sir Edward’s coin, he gave him a letter, grinning as he did so. It was impatiently opened, but as it was a somewhat closely written German missive, Sir Edward turned savagely on Reuben, —

“You know I don’t understand a word of your infernal language. What is the use of giving me this?”

Probably the threatened kick had called forth this retort on the part of the Jew. He took the letter, however, and began to translate it into English, of which language he had a tolerable knowledge, though the taciturnity of his nature made him generally keep his acquirements to himself. It was the missive Naomi had so frequently threatened to send, and had at last found an opportunity to get written for her by one whom she could trust not to reveal the secret to her mistress.

“Let us go at once!” was Sir Edward’s cry, as he turned towards the hotel. “Have you answered this letter?”

The Jew laughed with that hideous laugh of his.

“Wherefore should Reuben not communicate with Mother Naomi. She is discreet and wise.”

“Discreet! you know she has a tongue

that clacks like a bell. Naomi could not be silent to save her life. I am afraid you have been hasty, you should have come here first. I will go off, however, this very night."

* * * * *

Mimi is sitting by an open window. It is evening, and the last rays of the glorious sun are sinking into their golden bed, and dark shadows are creeping slowly all around. Yet for a few moments ere it finally departs, the light is strong and rich, and as it plays around the young Jewess' head, line by line it reveals the expression of her pale face, which looks white enough that evening, contrasted as it is with her black hair and sable garments. She is alone—alone with her overwhelming thoughts, her bitter self-communings. A newspaper lies open on her lap, and she gazes on it in a dreamy way, as if her mental powers refuse to grasp what the sense of sight tells her is but too true.

"God of my fathers! would that I were at rest," is the heart-cry that not for the

first time bursts from those parched and feverish lips.

“To die!” Had Mimi then no hope in life? Had the one beacon in the distance, to which we all so fondly cling, been for her extinguished for ever? Yes, it all seems dark and cheerless, that vast future which lies before her, and as she reviews the past, clutching nervously the English paper as she does so, she feels that she is suffering a just retribution.

“My punishment shall be heavy, even as was my sin,” she murmurs, as at last she rises and looks out into the pine forests, which grow each moment more and more sombre and majestic in the deepening gloom. The thought of Mrs. Kelly and her history passes across her mind.

“If I have done wrong, may I be forgiven,” she whispers softly, “for it is too late; I can do nothing now. My death alone can bring happiness to him I love. Happiness! I wonder if he be really happy. Does the sun shine for him in noonday

brilliancy ? Are there no shadows of regret encircling it as memory tells of bygone days ? Oh ! Edward, mine no longer ; to see thee once again my soul yearns. The Holy Angels grant me but this one consolation, and I will drink unmurmuringly to its bitter dregs that cup of justice which my own disobedient selfishness has brought me. Once more to see thee—with another ! Can I bear it,—will my poor mortality endure the sight ? ” For a few seconds she holds her aching head firmly between her hands, as though to calm, if possible, the agony of brain that well-nigh maddens her ; then she speaks again, in a calm low voice.

“ Yes, I will go. I will see this wonderful happiness. I will bless them both, myself unseen ; then I will return to these dark forests and await death or madness, even as the Lord wills.”

Poor Mimi, her brain was almost turned now, or she would not have imposed on herself so dark a fate ; the weight of her father’s curse lay heavily upon her,—the

knowledge that she had disobeyed every law which the religion of her childhood had instructed her to keep holy was ever present to her mind, and the greater the share of misery which fell to her earthly lot the more thoroughly was she impressed by the feeling that it was deserved, even in its utmost rigour. Women of old times wore next them jackets of harsh serge, beat their bodies with many stripes, and by other corporeal torments sought to appease an angry Deity, but Mimi's reparation was spiritual. She gave up her whole soul and spirit to remorse, and, prostrate in a deep humiliation, she performed her mental penance. May she not one day be forgiven?—or is her sin never to be wiped from the heavy list?

She would see *him* once again! Yes, as through a veil she would look upon him; it was a fresh scourge with which she was going to lacerate herself.

“He, doubtless, believed her to be dead, or, even if he knew she still lived, he had

probably set aside that marriage they had gone through ; in England, she had been told, such things were easy,—the marriage vow could readily be cancelled.”

Having once resolved to return to England and see Edward Bazalgette for the last time, Mimi grew restless and excited. She gave up the daily walks in the forest which she had taken ever since she came there, and she devoted all her time to the one thought of how this new idea which had come upon her was to be carried out. Naomi was faithful and true as steel, but that unruly member of hers could not be trusted ; and Mimi was fully aware that before they had been twenty-four hours in London, their whereabouts would be known to every one. No, by some device she must be left behind, and Mimi must start alone on this painful mission. She devoted some time then to maturing her plans, and, at last, when all was ready, she told the old nurse that she was simply going into a neighbouring town to receive some

money she had desired her lawyer to send there, but that she should not require her services as an attendant. Old Naomi was quite satisfied, for it was an expedition which the “gesegnetes Fräulein” not unfrequently made. Great, however, was her dismay and horror when hours passed on and she did not return. She wrung her hands, she went to all the old beldames in the village to ask what they thought of Mimi’s absence, and in a very short space of time the wildest conjectures were afloat, for, according to ancient precedent, the village gossips naturally took the very blackest view of what they supposed had occurred. Vainly the old nurse ransacked the Fräulein’s room, she only found a sealed packet, containing some money and the recommendation that—as she should not return for some weeks—Naomi should amuse herself as best she could with her numerous friends, but not discuss her and her affairs more than was needful. A necessary piece of advice, but ill followed, for never was a greater

fuss made, nor more chatter of women's tongues produced, than by this somewhat sudden disappearance of Mimi from the village where she had of late taken up her residence. Affairs, however, had not yet reached their climax ; the food old women so dearly love seemed to abound that Spring, for while the fire of excitement was still burning brightly in the village, fresh fuel came to increase it by an unexpected arrival in those quiet haunts where strangers appeared so seldom. It was no other than that of Sir Edward Bazalgette, accompanied by the ungainly Reuben !

CHAPTER XII.

CONQUERED.

THE house in Belgrave Street was at its best, fresh flowers were in all the vases, sweet scents pervaded the atmosphere, a tiny wood fire shone brightly in the grate, for though it was May the evenings were still chilly—everything in fact looked fresh, luxurious, and well-appointed. The sense of home-iness which Bertha Leigh's hand knew so well how to bestow was more than usually remarkable on that particular evening, and she herself, dressed in a soft tissue of the palest grey, a neutral tint which was especially in accordance with her general characteristics, stood by the fireside—wait-

ing. There was just a tinge of pink on her cheek, whether real or artificial it were hard to say.

A ring at the visitors' bell—she clutches the mantelshelf for a moment with a firm grip, but instantly she recovers her composure, and is all smiles and sweetness when a minute later Lord Avebury walks into the room. He looks round and accepts the situation at a glance, "there are to be no intruders, the interview is to be strictly *tête-à-tête*." He smiles momentarily as he bows over Bertha's hand, then his features assume a rigid inflexible look which it is not rare to find there, yet Bertha does not quite like it, she has learnt to understand Lord Avebury's moods so well.

"He must be fascinated and flirted with,—I am scarcely the woman I believe myself if I fail now," is her thought.

The talk for the nonce, however, was of mere platitudes,—dinner would be announced immediately, and Bertha scarcely

cared to be interrupted when she had once brought all her machinery into play. It was the very first time during their acquaintance that Lord Avebury had dined alone with Mrs. Leigh—it was not her usual habit to dare the conventionalities, but the strong measure had a strong motive, and this his lordship knew full well, and, under other circumstances, might have quailed. What man feels quite safe when a pretty intriguing woman brings all her battery to bear upon him !

The dinner was a marvel of art, as Bertha's dinners always were ; the most fastidious critic could have taken no exception to it, and Lord Avebury, *gourmet* as Bertha believed him to be, would, she hoped, expand under the influence of well-cooked viands and good wine, for as yet he had held himself somewhat stern and cold.

“When you have finished your wine come upstairs and we will have our chat in the drawing-room by the fire ; it will be pleasanter there,” she had said as the repast

once over, and the old butler having left the room, she soon after rose.

For a few minutes before he joined her she sat alone; the soft light from the moderator lamp was falling on her face, on which there was now a deeper flush, and though the half-closed eyes, veiled by the long lashes, told no tale of her inward thoughts, there was a nervousness of manner unusual in Bertha which showed she had some fear of failure. At last he came and dropped, as was intended, into the arm-chair opposite to her, but he spoke not; she must lead the van of the conversation then, and every moment she felt she was growing more and more unequal to the task.

“Has any ill befallen you?” she asked at last in a soft whisper; “you seem so silent and reserved to-night.”

“No ill, thank God,” he answered so earnestly that she looked up and saw a bright light burning in his eye.

It passed as he met her glance.

“You were wont to tell me all your

thoughts—that something has happened now I feel very sure, why do you withhold it, Avebury?”

“Yes, I have to thank you for being a patient listener; you have always been sisterly and true to me, Mrs Leigh,” and there was almost more of query than assertion in his tone.

Mrs. Leigh winced, but she went on talking valiantly.

“True to you! And yet you don’t half appreciate my goodness, but, like the rest of your thankless sex, accept it as a gratuity which is your due.”

“Indeed not; you will find me quite ready to acquit myself honourably of the immense debt I owe you! On that point at least you need have no fear. Now tell me, what is the important matter you have to communicate to me.”

She neither liked his manner nor his tone, but she determined to go on as though her sense of sight had failed her.

“We did not have our chat about Ted, you

know, and I thought you would be anxious to discuss the matter with me."

"It seemed to me that Miss Fenton told me all there was to tell on that subject,—it is scarcely a pleasant one."

"Marcia Fenton! What has changed you so, Avebury? There was a time when you refused to associate with Marcia Fenton, and said her noisy ways jarred your whole frame."

"Mere prejudice, my dear Mrs. Leigh. I have since discovered some of Miss Fenton's good qualities. Truth and honesty of purpose are strongly developed in her character. I admire them excessively; in fact a woman, according to my ideas, is not worth a sou without them."

She looked down and played with her rings.

"I am glad you have learnt to appreciate Marcia," she said in her most flute-like accents; "I thought you would in time see her from my focus. So she told you all about Ted, poor boy: I am so sorry— isn't a

divorce or something possible? It is so horrid to think of a Bazalgette making a *mésalliance*."

"What God has joined together, let not man put asunder," said Lord Avebury sternly.

"Good gracious, Avebury, you quite frighten me. I wish you would not come to see me in these tempers, they are too much for my poor nerves. Are you angry with me for not succeeding in my efforts to estrange Ted from that girl? I really did my best; it is not kind of you to twit me when I exerted myself so much for your sake, even condescended to intrigue!"

He bowed coldly.

"I feel infinitely obliged, but since Ted has married this girl, it is useless talking any farther on the subject; let us hope they will be happy together, that is all."

"Oh, this is too bad!" cried Mrs. Leigh; "you are annoyed, as of course you would be, about this odious marriage, and you visit all your vexation upon me; indeed, it is not

my fault if I failed in preventing it, you should pity not upbraid me;" and she put her lace handkerchief to her eyes and gave way to two or three touching little sobs.

"Failure is sometimes more to be desired than success," he said, rising and standing with his back to the fire, thus looking down on the widow as she sat there.

She withdrew her handkerchief and met his glance.

"What do you mean?" she asked briskly. "Are you then glad that Edward Bazalgette has married this Jewess? Oh! I see," she went on with a sudden change of manner, laughing as she spoke, "you think her riches will satisfy him, and he will not require to raise any farther post-obits."

"Such mercenary motives never entered my head," he replied angrily; "I am not in the habit of weighing the best feelings of a man's nature in a pair of golden scales, Mrs Leigh."

She had considerably overshot her mark,

but Bertha was so puzzled by and outraged at Lord Avebury's cold stern manner that she felt desperate, and as though she would say anything to rouse him. If they could only have a good quarrel, she thought, he would be more tender and pliable afterwards.

"Well, it is very annoying to have one's plans thwarted," she went on, unheeding his answer; "I had fully set my mind on his marrying Pettita St. Orme. I am very sorry too for her, poor child; a *parti* like Ted Bazalgette is not to be caught every day, added to which I think she liked him. Poor Pettita, I hope she will soon find another adorer. It is a lonely life for a woman when she is compelled to pass her days without a companion."

A deep sigh and then a pause, for Lord Avebury did not speak till Bertha asked at last, looking up at him suddenly,

"Do you think there is any chance of her marrying old Griesnach? She might do worse!"

"None whatever, nor of her bestowing her hand on that singing man to whom you were so willing she should give it."

Mrs. Leigh laughed hysterically.

"My dear Avebury, this is too delicious ; why, you make me out a regular match-maker ! I cannot think what has made you so horribly severe on poor me this evening."

"You invited me," he answered, "or I do not think I should have come ; it was a mistake like some others which I suspect strongly you have been making lately."

She grew pale as ashes.

"No, Avebury, no, not from you ; let all the world condemn me, malign me, but not you, I cannot bear it at your hands."

For a moment he was silenced. He had come there fully prepared to give Mrs. Leigh a lesson such as she had seldom received before, but she herself was disarming him. Could it be that she had really loved him, or was she only acting in order if possible still to gain that title and position which

he had believed all along was her sole thought.

“Well, well,” he said with that true horror all men have of ‘a scene,’ “let the past be buried, who knows, we may yet all be friends in the future.”

She looked at him aghast. “What did, what could he mean?”

“Are we not friends now, have we not been so always?” she asked.

“We might have been,” he answered gravely; “you yourself have caused the disruption.”

“I!” and she scarcely moved a muscle as she lay back passively in her chair and spoke softly, “I! Have I not lived but for him, would I not gladly have died for him, and yet he says I myself have snapped the chain which bound us.”

He stood looking at her with his back to the fire.

“Poor Avebury,” she continued changing her tone, and addressing him more directly, “you scarcely know the world as well as I

do, or you would not misjudge your best friends and listen to every pert chatterbox who chooses to malign them."

"Meaning —?" he asked, looking at her with a frown.

She met his questioning eye for an instant, then looking down she smoothed out the trimming on her soft gown and said gently,

"Marcia Fenton!"

Lord Avebury was growing irritated, he began to walk about the room. He had placed himself in somewhat of a false position; this was a more difficult task than he had anticipated when he undertook it. Here in her own house how could he quarrel with Bertha Leigh, especially too when at every point she met him with a gentle word, an offering of love? He was valiant and angry enough when absent, but in her presence both these qualities faded, and in their place arose a sort of belief in her still from which he could not wholly divest himself. The truth must be told however, else why was he there?—but

how ? was the question he was asking himself as he strode about the room.

She watched him for a while from under her long lashes, still lying back in the same passive attitude.

“Avebury dear,” she almost whispered at last, “it agitates me dreadfully to see you thus, do please sit down here by me and let us talk. I fear you are somewhat dyspeptic, good my lord ; you used to say Bertha had the power to soothe.

“Some anodynes produce temporary madness,” was the answer, and as he stopped his walk in front of her, there was a wild look in his eye as though the fit were on him now.

“Not if they are given in judicious doses, you naughty man ; now do sit there,—down in that little chair, and make yourself agreeable for awhile before you depart ; you have not been *very* pleasant this evening, that you must allow. Next time you come I will invite a bevy of young girls to amuse you ; since *I* have begun to fail, perhaps

Pettita St. Orme will be more successful. Your tastes have degenerated sadly of late, my dear Avebury, I never thought I should live to see you prefer chattering flirting girls to —”

“Intriguing women of the world,” he interrupted fiercely.

Mrs. Leigh had wandered unguardedly into forbidden ground, she had only herself to blame if she received a harsher answer than would perhaps otherwise have been launched.

She rose with a sudden start,

“Lord Avebury, is that epithet meant for me?”

“Your own conscience knows its aptness, Mrs. Leigh.

“Then it is indeed all over when *he* can address me thus,” and she sank once more into her chair and buried her face in her lace handkerchief.

“*Carramba!* but this is past all mortal endurance!” ejaculated his lordship, “you should have thought of the consequences

before you began the game,—for pity's sake don't cry. *Dio mio!* what a fool I was ever to have come here. There, Mrs. Leigh, do be rational, you did it for the best, I suppose, but at the same time it was neither a kind nor a friendly part you played when you represented my character in its blackest light to her, and told me she was frivolous and vain!"

Bertha looked up now, and there was a contemptuous sneer playing about her mouth.

"So you have been comparing notes with Pettita St. Orme, and listening to her vile insinuations against me. *She* has a talent for intrigue if you like, Lord Avebury, most wonderfully developed in one so young!"

"Silence!" he replied sternly, "not one word against Pettita St. Orme to me. She is one of the simplest, most ingenuous girls in London, and my betrothed wife!"

"Indeed!" was the only answer she vouchsafed, and then she lay back in her chair once more,—calm—passive—white even

to the very lips ; the tears were all dried up, the parched tongue refused to utter another syllable, while a sickening agony of heart made her dread lest unconsciousness should come over her while he stood there, and even Bertha Leigh had enough womanly instinct left not to wish him to see how much she had loved him.

Why had he come to insult her ? she thought, for that he had done so there could be little doubt ; and she roused herself with a vigorous effort to resent, if possible, some portion of her wrong, but though she rose and stood beside him once again, she dared not trust herself to speak. As for the expression of her face, it was strange and unnatural ; was it anger—love—or bitter hate which dwelt most strongly there ?

Lord Avebury had turned away and was leaning against the mantel shelf, he felt it would be unkind to watch her now. How fervently he wished himself away no tongue could tell ; if he had only known how Bertha would have received his communication, no

power on earth would have induced him to have made it.

She spoke at last, and the words were so calm, the whispered tones so even, that once more he began to doubt.

“Let me congratulate you,” she said; “I might have foreseen this—she is as you say simple and ingenuous. I have been wrong,—may she make you happy.”

She gave him her hand; it did not tremble, though it burnt like fire.

He bent over it and murmured a hope that, the past being forgotten, they might be friends in the future; a sentiment which was in direct contradiction to every determination he had formed on his way to Belgrave Street.

She smiled, but did not answer him. Bertha Leigh felt that the chord which had been snapped that evening were better not reknt; the join must inevitably show. And soon he left her with more of sorrow than of anger in his thoughts as he walked up the street, dreaming and smoking as he went.

No, Bertha had not altogether lost her power, for had he not become more than half convinced that she was not the deceitful intriguer that she seemed, but that she was truly and heartily devoted to him.

Shall we not draw a veil over the outburst of Bertha's real feelings when she found herself at last alone and free to give vent to them as she would? It is scarcely needed. In mastering them before Lord Avebury, she had mastered them for aye, as far as a violent crisis was concerned. She rang to have the lights put out, she gave a few directions to the old butler for the morrow, she went up to her room and talked with Adèle of her next new gown; save for her deadly paleness no one could have guessed that the evening had been otherwise than a pleasant one—she had simply been enjoying an agreeable *tête-à-tête* with an old and valued friend! Yet from that evening there would date a new epoch in Bertha's life; crushed and humiliated, all the sting was for the time taken out of her. She had had so

much faith in her own powers, and she had failed so utterly. She must however struggle on with assumed calmness for awhile, she felt, and not let people suspect either her weakness or her disappointment,—and then when it was all past and forgotten by that London world which has so many fresh excitements to engage its attention, what would happen next?

She neither knew nor cared.

CHAPTER XIII.

“OLD DICK.”

“WHY am I not allowed to go and see old Dick, and why is he not to be told of my happiness, I am sure he would be very pleased?” said Pettita one morning, when Mr. Griesnach, who, after hovering between life and death for some days, and being at last pronounced out of danger, was progressing slowly towards a state of convalescence.

“Because he is to be kept very quiet, dear,” answered Margaret softly; “any intelligence which would be likely to excite him would prove highly injurious.”

“ Oh ! I don’t think pleasant news ever hurts any one.”

“ How apt we all are to view things from our own standard,” said Margaret smiling, and she smoothed back her sister’s hair and kissed her on the brow as they stood together.

“ I am sure I don’t know what you mean, but here comes Lord Avebury, perhaps he will tell me,” and the question about Richard Griesnach was again put to him, to be met by a gravity she had not anticipated.

“ When we are married, darling. I have just come from Griesnach, he is too feeble to bear the reception of many visitors.”

“ Yet Margaret goes, and I believe I was always a pet of his ; it is too bad to keep me away,” and she turned from them with a little pout.

Lord Avebury followed her, and the cloud speedily cleared off her brow,—whilst talking to him Richard Griesnach was forgotten.

With Margaret, however, he was an ever

present thought. She divided her days between Jenkins and the 'Argus,' and visits to the sick man's room, where she moved about in her soft noiseless way, speaking but little, but administering surely and attentively to his wants, while the good Sister went to obtain her daily quota of fresh air. Though few words passed between them, Griesnach watched her as she glided about like some spirit from another world, and the sight of her seemed to soothe and tranquillize him. He was not then entirely alone in the world, bereft of all care, since his old friend's daughter came to tend him in his sickness and need. Lord Avebury went each day to inquire after him; but since the night he had sat up with him, he had never ventured into his presence, fearful lest the sight of a stranger might prove too much for him in his enfeebled state. Once past the delirious stage, however, Griesnach's senses were as acute as ever; he had recognised the tones of Lord Avebury's voice as they reached him from the outer

room. Had he not both heard them and seen the man during his wanderings that night? He lay calmly, passively, for days, and he spoke to no one of the voice he had heard, showed no sign as to whether it had disturbed him or not. Once, as he grew stronger, he had asked about the 'Argus,' and pressed Margaret's hand with tenderness when he was informed that she had been devoting all her time to keeping it "afloat," as Jenkins would have said. Then he became silent again as far as business and worldly cares were concerned, till the morning when he found himself once more in the large arm-chair in the study, and it was decided by the faculty that he was growing stronger and brisker every day, and only wanted country air and quiet, to give him back his accustomed health and spirits.

Still Margaret came as usual, and now under his direction went on with her work for the 'Argus,' frequently even writing articles from Griesnach's dictation. Each day, however, she grew more and more nervous, for

she felt that revelation about Pettita must soon be made ; strange that during all these weeks he had never once mentioned the child's name. The marriage was to take place ere long, yet how the subject was to be broached to Griesnach, Margaret did not know ; she dreaded a relapse into fever when he should hear of it ; in fact, she feared she knew not what, but she felt she could do nothing, and must trust to a merciful Providence for the issue.

The crisis came, as what we fear most generally does come, in an unexpected way.

They were sitting together, as usual with endless papers before them ; Jenkins had gone out loaded with "copy," which had passed through both their hands, when Griesnach, lying back in his chair to rest awhile, said suddenly,

"Well, Margaret, when is the wedding to take place ? Why have you told me nothing about it, child ?"

She started at his words and stammered out,

“I did not know—I thought—in fact, I wished—” He patted her hand as it lay on the table among the papers.

“Good girl, good girl, you hoped to spare me, but I am braver and stronger now. I have heard much, seen much during the last few weeks, Margaret,—more perchance than even you can guess.”

“Then you know of Pettita’s engagement?” said Margaret, still almost fearing that she had mistaken his meaning.

“Yes,” he said ; “I suspected it as I lay in bed when I used to hear Lord Avebury’s voice in the distance, and Jenkins confirmed my suspicions some days since.”

How thankful Margaret felt to Jenkins for his officiousness words cannot tell ; but notwithstanding Mr. Griesnach’s calm manner, her tongue was not yet untied on the subject of her sister’s future ; she looked at him as though she would take her cue from him,

“Don’t be afraid of telling me everything,” he said smiling ; “the current of my

life has changed during the last few weeks ; former madness has been expunged through much suffering.”

“ There is little to tell,” answered Margaret ; “ you seem already to know all that has happened.”

“ Oh ! but I want details. How did it all come about ? I must have Pettita here, her glib tongue, I warrant me, will not be so slow to speak.”

“ She said you would be pleased to hear of her happiness.”

“ Ay, and so I am. What devil possessed me to try and thwart it by wanting her for myself, I cannot now conceive. To imagine that a bright child as she is, should care for an old fiend like me, was a madness, wasn’t it, Margaret ?”

“ I don’t know,” she answered, “ love’s fetters attach themselves waywardly ; we mortals have but little control over them. Lord Avebury is scarcely your junior.”

Mr. Griesnach laughed, and there was no bitterness in the tone.

“No one but you would think of comparing us, my child. You have more patience with a poor cripple’s foibles than he deserves. You are right, affections in this world are whimsically shuffled.”

She grew crimson at his words, and without answering went on writing rapidly. But Mr. Griesnach evidently considered that he had done his portion of work for that day, and was inclined for a little friendly chat.

“Come, come, Margaret, put your pen away and feed a greedy man; you forget that there is much I want to know. I hear there has been quite a drama going on in our little circle, and I want to have the plot, and an account of the *dramatis personæ*.”

“Of which latter the centre figure was Mrs. Leigh,” said Margaret, matter of fact though she was, trying to catch his vein.

“Just so; upon my word she is a clever woman,”

“She got found out and foiled this time, though, notwithstanding her ability,” answered Margaret somewhat bitterly for her.

The mention of Bertha Leigh always enraged her as she thought of how she had treated Pettita. Then she told him all the tale, over which he laughed and gloated.

"An even fight, a very even fight," he exclaimed when she had finished, "so the lady is down at present. It won't be long before she is in the field again."

"Not against Pettita, I hope ; really, Mr. Griesnach, you make me feel quite nervous. If we had never left Woodlands none of this would have come about."

" 'All's well that ends well,' as our great bard hath it, my dear Margaret ; you forget too that Pettita made Mrs. Leigh's acquaintance at Woodlands, so you cannot prove that even your beloved country districts are safe from plot and counterplot. Upon my word, your story has done me good ; as soon as I can get out I will go and congratulate this fair intriguer on the success of her amalgamations."

"You used to believe in her," said Margaret somewhat mischievously.

Man like, he would not own himself mistaken.

“You know the old proverb, ‘all is fair in love and war’. Pettita got in our fair friend’s way, who could expect otherwise than that she would do her best to remove her?”

“Nonsense, Mr. Griesnach, you don’t think it a bit, and you are only talking in this strain to tease me. You know Mrs. Leigh has been playing a false double part, and behaving neither like a Christian nor a gentlewoman.”

Griesnach laughed, it amused him to see Margaret excited, she who usually met the wear and tear of life with so much serenity and calm.

And so they chatted the time pleasantly away, till Margaret at last tied on her bonnet to depart.

“I will come to you soon, child,” he said; “we will go on with our work in your little drawing-room, for you are not going to desert either the ‘Argus’ or me, eh, Marga-

ret? When those two are married we shall both be alone, but we need not be desolate for all that."

"No, Mr. Griesnach, no, I shall always be happy to be of use to you."

"Pettita won't want either of us, we can devote our time to each other; we have both been rather her slaves of late."

Margaret looked at him to see if she could detect a lurking bitterness in his words, but there was none. He pressed her hand warmly as he bade her farewell.

"Don't lose heart, Margaret, or fancy you are going to be dull because the child has found a mate. We will try and manage to make life pleasant without her."

And all the way she went on her return home Margaret pondered over Griesnach's words; she could not fully understand them, though they had a ring about them which told of hope and happiness in the future, and to Margaret this was no unpleasing sound.

"What had so changed him?" But that

was a question she vainly sought to answer.

There was such a bright look in her face, however, when she reached her home, that Lord Avebury, who happened to be standing on the doorstep, smiled as he saw her and guessed at least some portion of the truth.

“Griesnach is much better, is he not?” he asked as they went into the house together.

“Oh! yes; he wants Pettita to go and see him that he may hear from herself the tale of her happiness. He seems quite content.”

“*Carramba!* but I shall begin to think you have a fairy’s power to change black into white, Margaret. Dare I hope to be told how all this has come about?”

“Mr. Jenkins is the fairy if any one is. He told Mr. Griesnach.”

“Hurra for Jenkins! It is not often that he does anything pleasant.”

“What a noise you are making, you

two," and Pettita danced into the middle of the discussion and seemed perfectly satisfied now that she was told she might go and see 'old Dick,' if she liked."

"I always knew he liked me better than anybody, and would be delighted to hear that I intended to try and make myself contented with this lord here," and she gave a saucy look at Lord Avebury as she spoke. "Poor old Dick, we'll have him down at the Abbey, and teach him to believe that the country is not such a dreary wilderness as he thinks it. Perhaps we may find a wife for him, who knows; I am sure he wants one badly enough; don't you think so, Margaret?"

But Margaret had gone, this badinage was scarcely to her taste.

"My love, you should not tease your sister, it is not kind."

"Really, Avebury, do you think it is serious? *I* only meant it for a pastime."

"But *they* mean it for a lifetime, or I am much mistaken," he replied.

Pettita looked grave.

“What are you thinking of, my Princess, is there anything so very appalling in the idea of a marriage between Griesnach and our sweet Margaret?”

“Perhaps there won’t be when one gets used to it, but it will take some little time before I shall be able to accustom myself to the idea. I used to chaff Madge about it, but I never thought it really serious before, at least, not on her part.”

He laughed as he thought how little likely it was that she herself would ever have listened to a tale of love from Griesnach.

“Ah! well,” she went on, “if Madge likes him, I suppose it is all right. His captious irritability will give her something to soothe, and that is her vocation, you know. Poor dear old Madge; well, I’m rather glad to think that it may come to that. I suppose she would have missed me and my troublesome ways.”

“Which, nevertheless, I dare say she

will pass over very readily to my care ; and now having settled that knotty point, suppose you read this letter which has just arrived from Ted.”

CHAPTER XIV.

“GOOD-BYE, MARCIA.”

“GOOD-BYE, Marcia; probably we shall not meet again for some little time. I am going into the country to-morrow, my old uncle the squire is very ill,” said Bertha Leigh as she made her appearance at Miss Fenton’s one morning rather earlier than the strictly conventional rules of society permit.

“Going away, good gracious! Well, I hope a change of air will do you good; you have looked rather white and out of sorts lately.”

“Oh! I am very well,” answered Bertha hurriedly, “somewhat anxious about the old gentleman, that is all.”

Marcia laughed. Bertha's plausibility did not deceive her, though she was considerably at fault as to what had brought her there on that particular morning—that she wanted to make some discovery she had little doubt.

“ Is your uncle so ill that you cannot stay in town for the wedding ? ” she asked.

“ What wedding ? Oh ! Avebury's—they are such a time fixing the day that I really cannot wait any longer.”

“ Why, it is fixed for next Tuesday week, aren't you invited ? I am.”

Bertha gave a little gasp, but recovered herself in a moment.

“ Oh ! I cannot possibly remain in London so long as that, I know that was a day they talked of, but I think you are premature in saying it is really decided on ; besides, in the present state of my uncle's health, I scarcely think it would be befitting in me to enter into gaiety.”

Marcia rose and exhibited her card of invitation with some satisfaction ; if Bertha

had only come there to find out what was going on, she should have her fill of information. Poor Bertha, she had less chance of obtaining leniency from Marcia Fenton than from Lord Avebury himself; women are so much more relentless than men when they once make up their minds to deal certain savage little stabs.

“Very pretty—yes, I am glad I have seen the card,” she said as she held it daintily between her fingers; “of course they could scarcely send one to me. I am too intimate with both of them for it to be necessary. I am sure I hope they will be happy. You don’t know, Marcia, how anxious I have always been to bring this match about.”

Marcia looked at her openmouthed with astonishment.

“No, indeed, I did not know it.”

But she went on unheeding the expression of her friend’s face.

“Yes; I have long thought it a pity that Lord Avebury did not marry, and who could make him a better wife than the sweet

girl in whom we both take so lively and well-deserved an interest ?”

“ Oh ! of course I am all for Pettita,” said Marcia, so taken aback at Bertha’s words she scarcely knew what to believe ; “ but I thought you meant things to turn out very differently.”

“ What do you mean ? Oh ! about Ted Bazalgette. Well, you see I was rather awkwardly placed ; the knowledge of that secret marriage tied my tongue and made things appear quite different to what they really were.”

“ *Carramba !* to use his lordship’s favourite ejaculation, but I was not aware that you knew anything of the matter.”

“ My dear Marcia, do you suppose I should have persuaded poor dear Mrs. Kelly, of whose death I heard with the sincerest regret, to take charge of the girl if I had not felt that I was doing it for Ted’s sake ? But really I don’t intend to interest myself in other people’s affairs any farther, one only gets blamed and misunderstood.” And

the lace-handkerchief was applied touchingly to her eyes.

“A very wise conclusion,” cried Marcia, “it will be better for your friends, better for your enemies, and better for yourself, if you manage to stick to it.”

“I hope I have no enemies,” murmured Bertha; “it is a thought that would make me very unhappy.”

“Shouldn’t have imagined now that you would have cared one bit. You oughtn’t to with your peculiar gifts,” and Marcia seated herself exactly opposite Mrs. Leigh and looked at her very fixedly.

“I don’t understand you,” was the quiet answer, while Bertha put a very vague misty look into her face.

“Well, I suppose you will acknowledge that you have a talent for intrigue surpassing that given to most ordinary mortals, and it is a dangerous one when used too freely—generally produces more foes than friends.”

“Oh! Marcia, how can you be so unkind?”

I did not think *you* would have misjudged me thus. That is just what I complain of—I devote my life to the welfare of other people, and all my little efforts on their behalf are called by nasty names—it really is too bad. Intrigue, indeed; if it had not been for me would this marriage between Pettita St. Orme and Lord Avebury ever have come about? She ought to go down on her knees and thank me instead of already giving herself the grand airs of ‘my lady.’”

Marcia could resist no longer, her loud laugh echoed through the room till the very furniture vibrated as though jarred by its noisy tones.

“You are a joke, upon my word you are,” she exclaimed between the repeated peals; “I have seen a good deal of roughish queerish people among papa’s business acquaintances, but I never came across your equal—never.”

Mrs. Leigh rose.

“Really, Miss Fenton, I did not come here to be insulted. I thought you had some regard for me, and therefore did not wish to leave town without bidding you good-bye. I regret, however, extremely that I took so much trouble.”

“Sit down, sit down, Bertha, and don’t be absurd. I have the intensest admiration for you ; pluck is a thing I value as only an Englishwoman can, and a woman who can stand firmly on her own ground and never acknowledge herself beaten is worthy of the highest commendation ; never mind how she tried to make her game, we won’t enquire into that, enough that she won’t own she has lost it. I’ll stick to you, Bertha, and help you to pooh-pooh the public talk, only no more little finessing dodges if you please, because I can’t always see the length and breadth of them.”

Bertha sat back on the sofa where Miss Fenton had pushed her, and holding out her hand pressed Marcia’s warmly,

“I have always loved you and valued

your friendship, dear, whatever other people said against you."

"All right, Bertha, all right. I don't care what people say about me ; if they don't like my noisy slang ways, they must do the other thing, that is all."

"But it is a pity, dear, that you cannot subdue yourself just a little."

Marcia began to laugh again.

"This is a highly developed specimen of female friendship," she said ; "we seem bent on giving each other a few home thrusts,—gall rolled up in sugar-candy !"

"You make fun of everything, even of my most well-intentioned sentences," said Bertha rising, "but I really must be off. I have an immensity of things to do before I leave town."

"So you are determined to go and immure yourself with the squire ; why, you'll die of the blues in a week."

"Oh ! I shall not stay there long. I shall go abroad later ; I might be useful to Ted Bazalgette in his search for his wife."

“Do you think so? I thought you said just now you were going to keep clear of interference. I should recommend you at all events to steer out of Sir Edward’s way—he is in a rampant state, verging on madness.”

“You forget I have the power to soothe poor dear Ted. How glad he would be to see me in Paris. By the way, I suppose though he will be over for this marriage.”

“Not coming, for the very best reason, not asked.”

“Dear, dear, dear,” said Bertha musingly, “how obstinate Avebury is on that subject! I must have another little chat with him about it before I go, and see if I cannot persuade him to forgive Ted and invite him. Good-bye, Marcia; write sometimes and let me know how things go on.”

“Good-bye, Bertha; the end of this little drama crowns the beginning. Keep a brave heart, and I’ll tell every one it is a great mistake—you don’t care a bit.”

Mrs. Leigh coloured up, but she did not

she speak again, only kissed Marcia and went away to hide her mortification among the green trees which surrounded the ‘Manor House.’ This last little fight was about all she was equal to, for both health and nerves would have failed soon, from the constant pressure necessary to keep up the semblance of a composure and an indifference which she in no way felt.

“Poor Bertha; well, I’m rather sorry for her after all, she looks so white and soft and bewitching, too, in her pretty grey clothes. What a pity it is she cannot learn to speak the truth! ‘Have a little chat with Lord Avebury,’ indeed, why to my certain knowledge he has not been near her for the last six weeks. She is clever, though, and the way she has taken matters is worldly wise—queer that I never gave her credit for so much pluck; she always began to cry and seemed afraid of a contest; it is astonishing though what we women can do when our self-love is wounded. She has had a pretty good tumble, too, or she would scarcely have

come sneaking in here to get me to pick her up and defend her, for that is what she wanted I suppose, though of course she could not say so plainly."

And Bertha's last move before she quitted the game entirely had been a wise one. Before the day was out Marcia was assuring some gossiping acquaintances that they were quite mistaken in believing otherwise; "Mrs. Leigh was charmed at the idea of Lord Avebury's marriage, and only regretted that she was compelled to go and see her uncle who was very ill."

"She told me so herself this very morning," concluded Marcia.

"Because you see, dear," she said when she was relating the whole episode to Pettita, "it would have been such a horrid fib to have bowled straight off one's own bat; she did say so, you know, and after all we women are bound to be loyal to each other."

What was there about Bertha Leigh that the glamour of her fascinations cast its spell

on all who became acquainted with her, and that they seemed as though they could never wholly free themselves from her influence ?

CHAPTER XV.

THE COMING HOME.

THE stately pile of the 'Abbey' seemed all aglow with sunshine, for it was a hot July morning, and not even the most cleverly constructed bits of modern mechanism could prevent the intense heat from penetrating into the newly and prettily furnished rooms. The old hall alone retained its prerogative, and was cool sombre and church-like. The roses were all in full blossom and were twining themselves profusely about the windows of the exquisite drawing-room which Lord Avebury had furnished so daintily for his bride. From the distance, wafted gently on the summer air was the sound of merry bells, and

everywhere in the house and out of it might be heard the tread of rapid footsteps which, regardless of the great heat, were hurrying to and fro. Something of unusual importance was evidently astir,—it was no less a fact than the hourly expected arrival of ‘My lord’ and ‘My lady’! For years the Abbey had not shown such signs of busy life, and the many servants were constantly tumbling over each other in their zeal to have everything quite ready and in order when the bride and bridegroom should arrive. At last, when the heat which at midday had been so oppressive was beginning to moderate as the shades of evening crept over the earth, huzzas were heard in the distance; nearer and nearer they came till the four greys dashed up the carriage drive, and Lord Avebury and Pettita stood on the portal of their future home.

“She is bonnie and beautiful,” was the servants’ verdict as they were all ranged in the hall to receive their new mistress, and Pettita blushing and smiling said in her im-

pulsive way a few pleasant words to them, and then passed on into the drawing-room.

“This is lovely,” she cried; “why it is quite a different room to what it was when I was here in February. Oh, Avebury, how good of you to have taken so much trouble for me! Poor Bertha, how well I remember her sitting there by the fire. I am not sure I am not just a little bit remorseful about that day.”

“Nonsense, dearest, nonsense,” he answered quickly, “don’t mar our ‘coming home’ by thoughts of Mrs. Leigh. She would never have been here as mistress even if I had not known you.”

Was he deceiving himself or seeking to deceive her? But while examining all the pretty things Lord Avebury had collected together to give her pleasure, Bertha Leigh and her affairs passed entirely out of Pettita’s mind.

Until dinner should be announced she wandered about the Abbey, peering with child-like curiosity into every nook and corner.

“She had not half seen it that day when she came there for a few hours,” she said. After a while she left Lord Avebury, who was talking to the gardener about the well-being of some rare plants he had sent down from London. She was impatient to be everywhere at once, and their prolonged talk bored her,—“what if she should lose herself among those many passages, was it not her own house now and the sooner she learnt her way about it the better.” So on she went, now wondering at the immense number of rooms through which one after another she passed, now crying out with delight as some fresh beauty met her eye; for there were pretty things of every age and realm stowed away in various portions of the Abbey, to be arranged in due order now that life for his lordship had begun anew. At last Pettita found herself at the end of a long passage which led from the hall exactly opposite the drawing-room and formed a sort of cloister; old English arches evidently filled in with glass in more modern

times being on one side, while rooms connected with the servants' offices were on the other. At the end of this passage hung heavy crimson curtains ; she drew them aside—a massive richly carved oaken door was behind. She turned away half afraid of what she might see if she attempted to open it—she would go for Avebury and ask him to show her what was there. He was, however, still standing in the hall talking to the gardener, and her curiosity got the better of her patience, so she pulled up the queer old latch,—it yielded readily to her touch and she entered.

‘ A little glooming light, much like a shade,’

fell over the tiny chapel, for so it was, and for a moment Pettita stood entranced. The only object which she really could thoroughly distinguish was the cabinet which Lord Avebury, on becoming its purchaser, had placed there ; the doors were thrown open and the last rays of the setting sun, coming in as they did aslant a high window, fell on

them, leaving in shadow every other object in the chapel. The picture so suddenly revealed to Pettita startled her almost into fear. She paused and gazed breathlessly ; speedily, however, she discovered that she was not the only gazer there. Half crouching, half kneeling on the ground, there was a female form. She was just turning to rush shrieking for assistance, when she was held back by her skirt.

“ Stay, lady, stay, one word before you leave me. I would not injure you for worlds, only let me look upon your face once more.”

Pettita’s fright grew less as she heard those gentle tones, and she looked down on the speaker.

“ You !” she said, “ what do you do here ? You are the woman who brought me the ring that night.”

“ Yes, lady, yes ;” and catching Pettita’s hand, she looked at it long and earnestly as it glistened on her finger.

Once released, Pettita took off the ring, and giving it to her said,

“Keep it yourself, my good woman, whoever you may be ; it has no value in my eyes since it well-nigh cost me a life’s happiness.”

“Yet I took it to you for the best, and you are happy with him, are you not ? ”

“Happy ! Yes, but I shall not be so long if everything is going to be enveloped in mystery. I hate mystery, I am not clever enough to fathom it. Tell me who you are,—some spy of Bertha Leigh’s I suspect ; she is always trying to annoy and thwart me.”

“If Mrs. Leigh have wronged you, lady, she has done tenfold wrong to me.”

“Well this grows past all comprehension and I don’t half like it,” murmured Pettita, “I am always getting into a pitfall. I wish Lord Avebury would come.”

“Once again let me see him, only once in life, and then peace be with you both for evermore,” cried the crouching woman, seizing both Pettita’s hands and covering them with kisses.

“See him, yes of course, why not? I will call him if you will let me go.”

“But he must not know that I am here. I must see him, mark you, lady, without his seeing me; then I will go away and you shall never hear of me again. I swear it by those Sorrows, only you too must promise to keep my secret to the death,—never must he know that we have met to-day. The meeting was an untoward accident dealt me by the cruel Fate which pursues my path so unrelentingly.”

Pettita's one idea was that the poor woman was mad, her one thought was how she could pacify her so as to get away. She persuaded her to go and sit quietly down while they arranged a little plan, and finally she succeeded, after uttering a variety of promises which she had no intention of keeping, in making her way out of the chapel. She at once rushed breathlessly down the passage into the hall where Lord Avebury had just finished his colloquy with the gardener.

“My dear love, what is the matter? You look as white as though you had seen a ghost”

“And so I have, there is a woman there in the chapel—Oh! Avebury, I am so frightened; she is mad, I think.”

“Nonsense, Pettita, you are over tired from your long journey. It is one of the servants in all probability.”

“It is the woman who brought me Sir Edward’s ring, and I have given it back to her. She is quite mad, poor thing, she wants to see you without being seen herself. I had to swear all sorts of horrid things before she would let me away. I was afraid she was going to kill me.”

Lord Avebury smiled, he was a little bit incredulous still, romances of this sort do not frequently occur under matter of fact nineteenth century roofs. He put his arm round his wife, however, who was still trembling from fright, and they went down the passage together,

Sitting passively with clasped hands and

rigid features, they found the Jewess where Pettita had left her. She started up when she saw the couple, raising both her hands to her eyes as she did so.

“Lady, you have played me false. Heaven will avenge for this.”

Lord Avebury advanced a step nearer to her, for the darkness was increasing and he wished to make sure of her features before he spoke.

“Jacobsen’s daughter and my nephew’s wife—how comes it that we meet here?” and his accents were cold and stern. He had not forgiven the girl for marrying Sir Edward, and her present intrusion into his house and the fright she had given Pettita had served in no way to mitigate his wrath. She dropped her hands and looked at him fixedly for a second, then she gave a little cry, tottered, and would have fallen in a dead faint at their feet, had he not caught her in time.

“My love, go and call for assistance and let us carry this wretched girl upstairs—

anxiety and annoyance must have turned her brain, poor thing, or she would scarcely have played at ball with happiness as she seems to have done."

So they carried Mimi upstairs and laid her on a sofa by an open window, where she remained unconscious for some hours,—servants being sent about in all directions, and long before she had recovered from her swoon the telegraphic wires were bearing the swift message,

"Your wife is here and ill, come at once."

When Mimi did at last return to consciousness, she lay as though stupefied by a sudden blow, and no one could succeed in eliciting from her an explanation. How she had got there unknown to any one was a problem which somewhat puzzled Lord Avebury, unless she had bribed the servants, but they seemed as surprised as he could be at discovering that the Jewess was secreted in the house, and could only account for her unobserved entrance by the

fact that they had all been unusually occupied in making preparations for the coming home.

Pettita stole at intervals into the room and looked at Mimi as she lay there passively, so white and still ; she was really rather afraid of her, and said more than once to Lord Avebury that she should be so glad when Sir Edward came and took her away.

“ I wish with all my heart she had never come,” he ejaculated ; “ we have had enough of melodramas. I hoped they were all finished, but since she is here we must keep her as our guest till she is well.

“ I don’t believe she will ever be well again,” replied Pettita with a little shiver, “ those large eyes of hers look so wild and deeply set in her white face ; she must be very unhappy about something, poor thing. I wonder if she has been very wicked.”

“ Disobedience and deceit, my darling, are generally the parents of remorse.”

“ Oh ! Avebury, how very shocking ; poor

Mimi, though she frightens me horribly I will try and be kind to her, and make her forget if possible."

Their conversation was interrupted by a request from the Jewess that Lord Avebury would grant her an interview for a few minutes. Thank Heaven then she was going to speak at last, and some of these clouds would be cleared away.

For a long half-hour he sat and listened while she told him all, and the fresh revelations about Bertha Leigh's wily ways pleased him as little as the knowledge that much of this tissue of mistakes had been occasioned by Reuben's over solicitude to proclaim Sir Edward as his heir. This as we know was an especially touchy subject with Lord Avebury; and the fact that she had imagined him to be already dead, and Sir Edward and Pettita installed at the Abbey as man and wife, did not tend to raise Mimi in his estimation, though, as he said, the most charitable construction he could put on the whole affair was "that her brain

had become diseased from remorse, or she would never have hatched such a romance."

It was indeed a strange story as she related it, and almost warranted the conclusion at which he arrived. She had left Germany, she said, and travelled day and night to London, hoping to be an unseen witness of the marriage ceremony, but she was too late. Twenty-four hours before her arrival, Lord and Lady Avebury had started on a short tour, before they should take up their quarters in their new home at the Abbey. Thither then Mimi repaired, determined to wander about in the neighbourhood in order to catch if possible, a sight of the couple in whose fate she imagined her own was so closely merged. For a week she had been residing in a lodging she had taken at one of the keeper's cottages, and she was already becoming known as "the pretty strange lady who had come down to pick up her health, poor thing;" so that she strolled about wherever she listed, no one asking her any questions. Owing, perhaps, to the

extra amount of work which was employing the servants the day the bride and bridegroom were expected, she had been able to venture unmolested, even to the very threshold of the house itself. Some dusting was going on and all the doors were open. Mimi caught sight of the wonderful cabinet which had so entranced her in the past ; in a rash moment she entered and crouched before it,—perhaps in silent prayer !

No one noticed her, the doors of the chapel were closed, the curtains drawn, but still she knelt on there ; no one was likely to seek her, “and surely in a Christian land a chapel was the safest place of refuge for the lonely and distressed.” At all events she was afraid to cry out, afraid to beg for liberation from the position in which she had placed herself ; “if death would only come and overtake her there, she would gladly welcome it as the close of her earthly troubles, the only efficient solution of her own and her fickle-minded husband’s entangled fates.”

She felt how justly Lord Avebury had reason to be displeased with her, she said, but she hoped he would not only forgive her, but Edward Bazalgette too, who, she assured him, had had no share in bringing about the annoyances which her mad jealousy alone had caused.

But, notwithstanding Mimi's pleading, when Sir Edward at last arrived, having started at once from Paris, to which place he had returned after his vain journey into Germany, he was scarcely received with as much cordiality as he had expected from his uncle, who was a good deal irritated by what he had heard, and was moreover scarcely pleased at having the first few days of his new life at the Abbey marred by what he called "the absurd vagaries of these two romantic young fools."

Pettita, however, at last persuaded him to be more gracious, and made him promise to receive Mimi,—who still kept her room, more from fear of Lord Avebury than from actual illness,—with something of the

urbanity and courtesy for which he was so renowned.

Thus one evening she joined the family circle at dinner, for Sir Edward and she were to take their departure on the morrow. As Pettita had said, there was a doomed look about her; how could she ever live down the past and become once more the brilliant happy girl she had once been? Though for Sir Edward's sake she might try to forget, would not the remembrance of her father's curses and her father's death haunt her still, till her poor mind, worn out at last by constant pangs, would long to be at rest, the very earthly happiness for which she had risked even her eternal salvation being now the source whence her sorrow came. But not yet—through years was she to suffer, and the fight was a valiant one; none of those who saw her in the brilliant throngs into which she perpetually accompanied Sir Edward guessed at the canker-worm which lay at her heart. He, meantime, never grew tired of hearing

the praises which were lavished on his beautiful Mimi, to whom the silence and reserve in which she now ever shrouded her real feelings only served to add a queenly dignity and royal grace.

“At last they are gone, and shall we not hope for a little quiet?” had been Lord Avebury’s exclamation when he saw the carriage which was to take Sir Edward and Mimi to the nearest station, drive from the door.

“I was beginning rather to like her,” answered Pettita; “there was something interesting in her gloomy ways. Fancy her bringing me that ring because she thought I was going to marry Ted; would you ever have imagined that would have proved to be the explanation? And you were so very suspicious about my share in the little transaction; thought I had been flirting with all sorts of naughty men,” and she looked up at him archly and mischievously.

“*Carramba!* I wish to hear no more

about it," he said almost sternly ; " if you love me, you will refer to it no more."

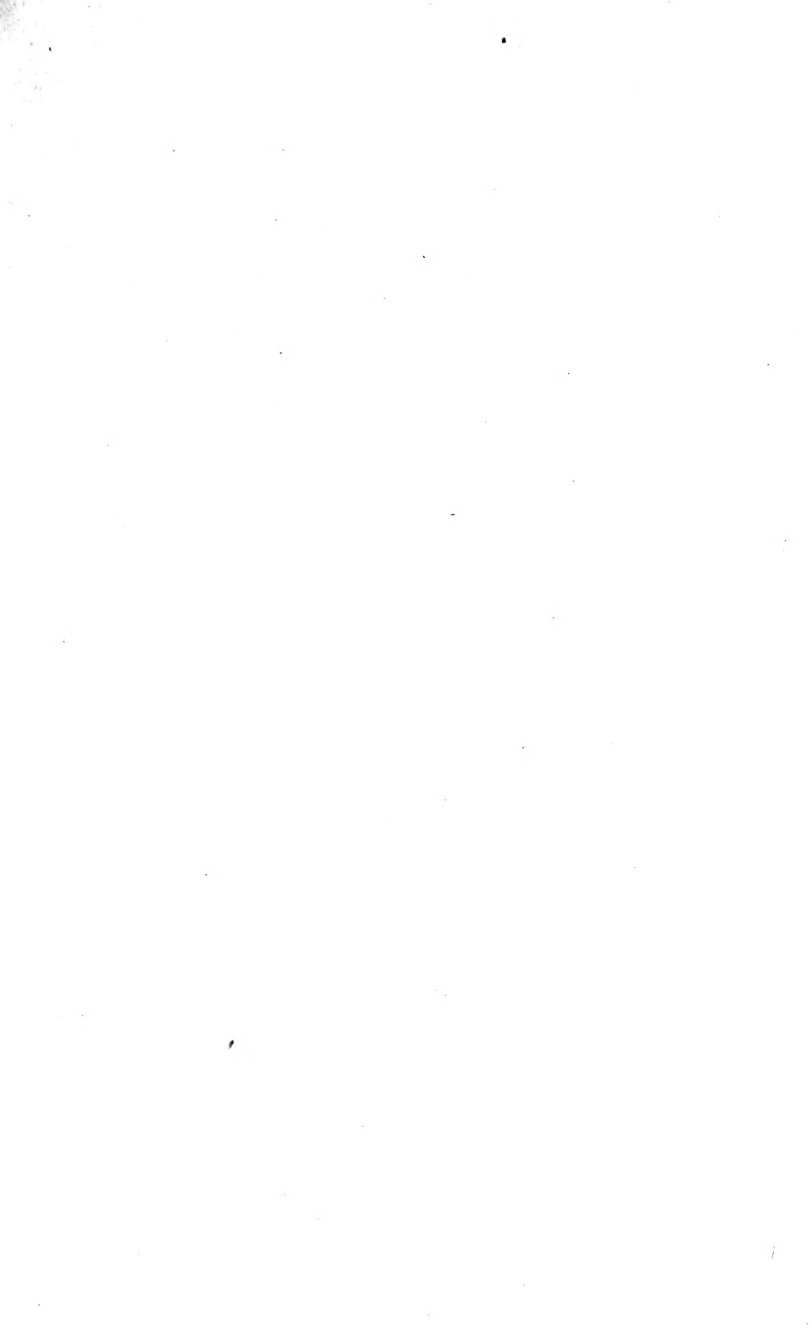
" Well, I will not," she said, " if you will come with me to the old well ; I seem to owe it a pilgrimage, and this sudden invasion has hitherto prevented it."

So they went both of them together and sat once more beside that sturdy relic of old Rome, enjoying to the full the beauty of the gorgeous summer's day. Everything around was so still, so harmonious, yet so instinct with life, the wood pigeons in the trees above their heads cooed their answers to their mates, the bees buzzed busily among the limes, the wild conies chased each other sportively, even at their very feet,—Lord Avebury raised Pettita's fingers as they played with the crystal water, and kissed them, all wet as they were.

"The fountains mingle with the river,
And the rivers with the ocean,
The winds of Heaven mix for ever
In a sweet emotion.

Nothing in the world is single,
All things, by a law divine,
In one another's being mingle,—
Why not I with thine ? ”

THE END.







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